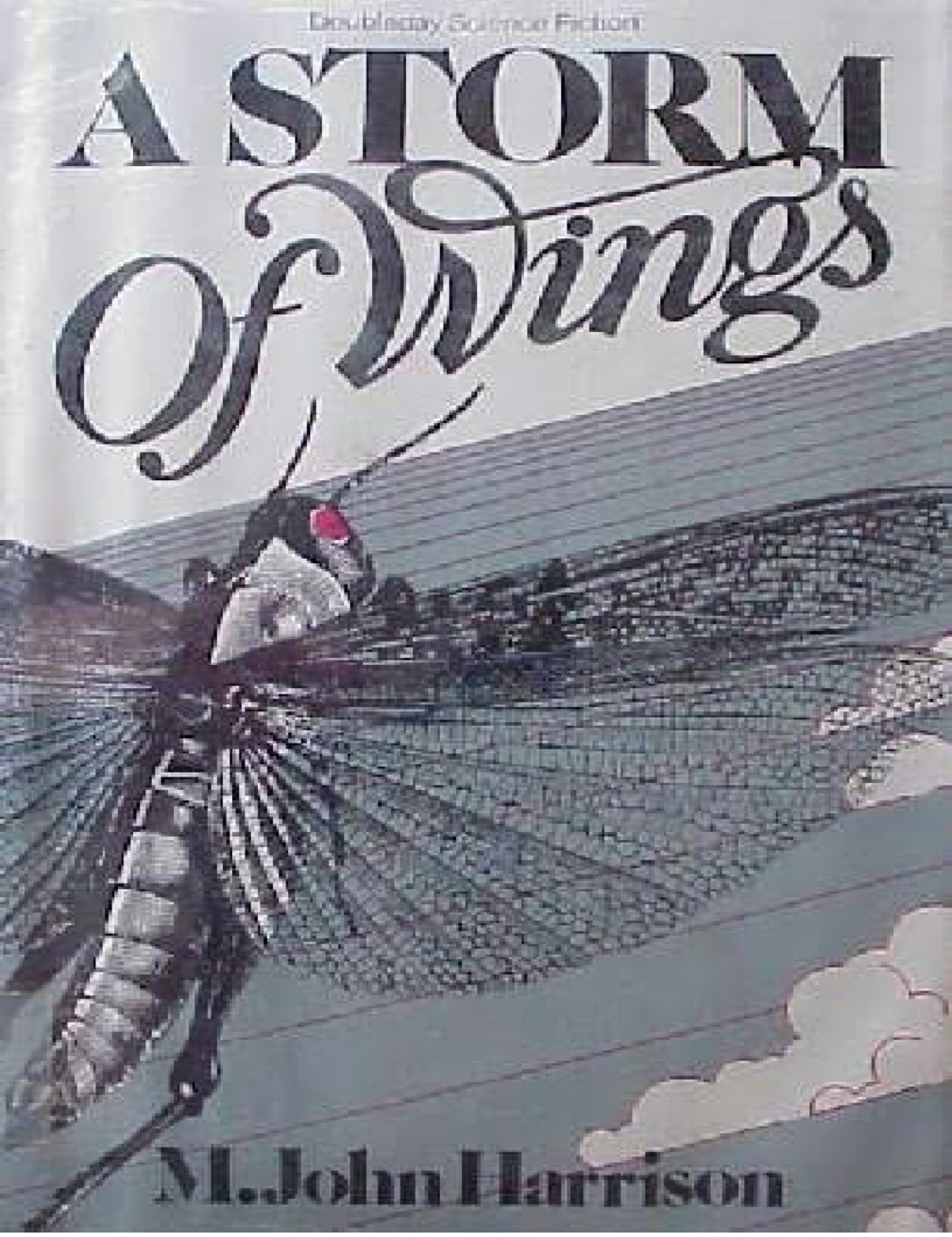
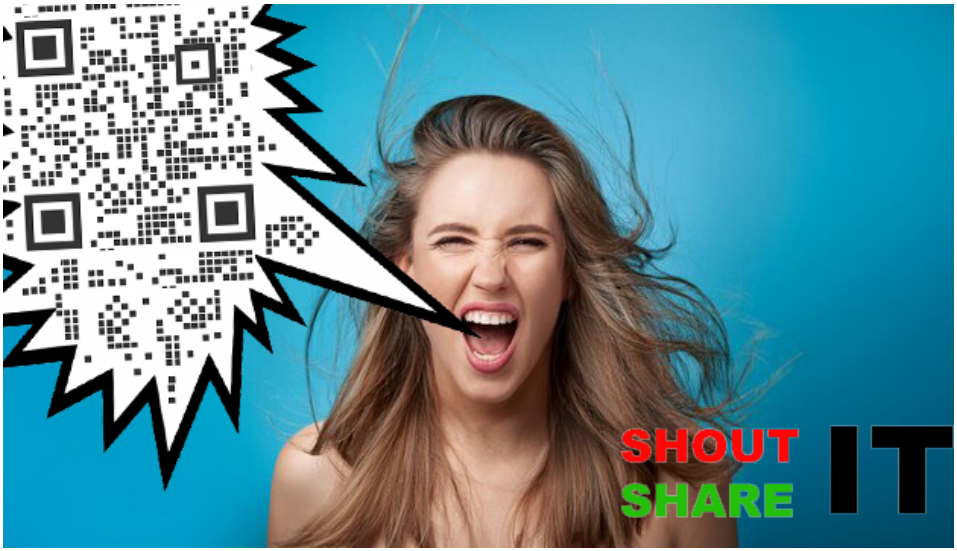
Doubleday Science Fiction

A STORM of Wings



M. John Harrison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Annotation

It is the time of the Locust. 'Fear death from the air, and avoid the North -' Eighty years have passed since Lord tegeus-Cromis broke the yoke of Canna Moidart, since the horror of the geteit chemosit. The Reborn Men, awoken from their long sleep, have inherited the Evening Cultures. In the wastelands to the north and west of Virconium a city is being built. But not by men. In the Time of the Locust a paralysing menace threatens to turn the inhabitants of the Pastel City into hideous, mindless insects..

- M. John Harrison
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M. John Harrison
A Storm of Wings

1: The Moon Looking Down

In the dark tidal reaches of one of those unnamed rivers which spring from the mountains behind Cladich, on a small domed island in the shallows before the sea, fallen masonry of a great age glows faintly under the eye of an uncomfortable Moon. A tower once stood here in the shadow of the estuarine cliffs, made too long ago for anyone to remember, in a way no-one left can understand, from a single obsidian monolith fully two hundred feet in length. For ten thousand years wind and water scoured its southern face, finding no weakness; and at night a yellow light might be discerned in its topmost window, coming and going as if someone there passed before a flame. Who brought it to this rainy country, where in winter the gales drive the white water up the Minch and fishermen from Lendalfoot shun the inshore ground, and for what purpose, is unclear. Now it lies in five pieces. The edges of the stone are neither shattered nor worn, but melted like candlewax. The causeway that once gave access here – from a beach on the west bank where lumps of volcanic glass are scattered on the sand – is drowned now, and all that comes up it from the water is a strange lax vegetation, a sprawl of giant sea-hemlock which for some reason has forsaken the mild and beneficial brine of the estuary to colonise the beach, spread its pale and pulpy stems over the shattered tower, and clutch at a stand of dead, white pines.

In this time, in the Time of the Locust, when we have nothing to ourselves but the hollowness within us, in the Time of Bone, when we have nothing to do but wait, nothing human moves here. Nothing human has moved here for eighty years. Fire, were it brought here, would be pale and dim, hard to kindle. Passion would fade here on a whisper. Something in the tower's fall has poisoned the air here, and drained the landscape of its power. White and sickly and infinitely slow, the hemlock creeps out of the water to run sad rubbery fingers over the rubbish in the fallen rooms. The collapse of the tower seems complete, the defeat of artifice accomplished.

Yet in the Time of the Locust are we not counselled to patience? Eighty years have passed since tegeus-Cromis broke the yoke of Canna Moidart, since the Chemosit fell and the Reborn Men came among us; and in the deeps of this autumn night, under the aegis of an old and bitter geology, we witness here in events astronomical and enigmatic an intersection crucial to both the Earth and the precarious foothold on it of the adolescent Evening Cultures. 'Wait! Things are. Things happen. Only wait!'The estuarine cliffs impend, black, expectant; the air is full of frost and anticipation…

It is the hour of our old enemy, the Moon. Her fugitive reflections

shiver on the water amid the cold unmeaning patterns of the wind. Above, her tense circle aches across the sky (imprisoned there within it, staring down, the pocked face of our mysterious crone, our companion of a million-million years). Somewhere between midnight and dawn, in that hour when sick men topple from the high ledges of themselves and fall into the darkness; suddenly and with no warning; something can be seen to detach itself from the edge of that charmed circle and, through the terrible spaces surrounding, speed towards the Earth. It is only a tiny puff of vapour, a cloud of pollen blown across a single ray of light in some darkened, empty room – gone in the time it takes to blink, to rub the eyes and rearrange the waiting brain: but nothing like this has been seen for ten thousand years; and though all might seem unchanged, and the Moon hang never so white and hard over the rim of the cliffs, like a powdered face yearning from a vacant doorway, and the memory decide the eye has played it false – nothing will ever be the same again.

Not many hours later, as the thin, uncertain light of day spreads like smoke between the soft fat stems, limning the fallen column of the tower, a figure emerges from the hemlock thickets – puzzled and reluctant as if harried from a deep sleep – to scan the southern sky where the Moon is still a bone-white image, the cankered face which lingers in a dream. The old man shivers a little, and settles his cloak about his shoulders; they confront for a time, man and planet. But then in an instant, sunrise proper has splattered everything below with blood – the sea, the shore, the hemlock and the old man's cloak all smeared and dappled with it – and he turns urgently away to drag from cover a small crude wooden boat. Its keel grates on the shingle, oars fall whitely on the water. The day brightens, but as he rows, the old man winces from the ominous sky. Beaching his boat on the western shore, muttering and panting with the effort, he pauses at the water's edge for a final glimpse of the tower, locked in its long struggle with decay; then shrugs and hurries up a flight of steps cut long ago into the cliff. While behind him, a single fish eagle with wings of a curious colour beats up out of the bright south and swoops over the island like a valediction.

In the Time of the Locust it is given to us to see such things.

The Reborn Men do not think as we do. They live in waking dreams, pursued by a past they do not understand, harried by a birthright which has no meaning to them: taunted by amnesia of the soul.

Alstath Fulthor, the first of them to be drawn by Tomb the Iron Dwarf from millenial interment in the Lesser Rust Desert, remembered nothing of his previous life: instead, his steps were dogged by a suspicion he could not make plain even to himself. His body, his

blood, his very germ cells knew (or so it seemed to him), but could find no everyday language in which to tell him what his life had been like during the frigid lunacy of the Afternoon. Dark hints reached him. But the quivering fibrils of his nervous system were adjusted to receive messages dispersed a thousand or more years before, intimations faded on the winds of time.

In the months following his revival he dreamt constantly: Sometimes of a large silver insect, clicking and metallic, the life-cycle of which he was able to observe in all its main aspects; at others of a woman (who sat alone in a room so tall that its ceiling was a web of shadow, spinning a golden thread which, of its own accord, rose and flickered from her hands until it filled all that mysterious, immense, whispering space above her). In the ruck and ruin of Soubridge, with its warehouses full of rotting fish and massacred children, during the long icy march through the Monar Mountains in winter, and at the storming of the North-East Gate, these images came repeatedly between him and the battle: the insect with its expressionless faceted eyes, the woman with her jewelled spinaret. (Often he inflicted dreadful cuts on its carapace; or smeared her sleeve with blood; and once, as he fought his way through the streets of Viriconium to shake the hand of Tomb the Dwarf over a heap of Northmen's corpses, the flames along the Proton Circuit merged for a moment with the woman's strange writhing skein, so that his past and his present crackled in a lightning arc through his mind and he fell on his face blinded, and was taken for dead, no longer able to tell which was real – the airy whisper of the city fires or the roaring of that golden cloud… *)* Steadily though, as if he were leaving the haven of some second childhood, even these reference points seemed to be withdrawn from him, to be replaced by a rushing chaos, the sense of an act of memory continually performed without relief, a hidden river in the night, from which might sometimes surface unbidden some fragment of an event drifting like a dead branch amid the unidentifiable rubbish of the tides…

A face stalked him between the twilit stacks of the ancestral library, bobbing like a balloon. It came very close to his, twitching and dissolving under the impact of some deeply felt emotion, then retreated with a hiss of indrawn breath;

'What are you doing?'someone asked him. They were outside the walls but he didn't know where…

He stumbled through the arteries of his home, his brain buzzing and vibrating with a new vigour, discovering chambers and oubliettes he had never seen before. At every turn hands beckoned him in…

Here, organic towers, tall shapeless masses of tissue cultured from the plasm of ancient mammals, trumpeted and moaned across the

abandoned wastes of another continent, their huge cynical voices modulating on the wind, now immensely distant, now close at hand. *Natural philosophy,* they maintained (holding him to be in heresy), is a *betrayal of invention. It is an edifice of clay.* It was always night there…

A city spread itself before him in the wet, equivocal afternoon light like interrupted excavations in a sunken garden. It could be reached by a ladder of bone. 'I will go down into that place!'

With these poor and misleading relics of a dead culture he tried to create a past for himself and so achieve, like any other human being, some experiential perspective from which to judge his own actions; crouching, as it were, on the banks of his own internal stream and scooping from the water those things which floated closest. They rarely helped him in dealing with the new reality of the Evening Cultures. And at least one of the catches he made in this manner came to haunt him, a dead thing risen from the bottom-mud of one incarnation to infect his perception of the other. It was not a normal memory, rendered as an image – a sound, a scent, a vision of a face or place: rather it came as an act he felt compelled to perform – or one which his body might perform quite of its own accord, as if his muscles remembered what he did not – and in performing, recall.

Eighty years, then, had passed since tegeus-Cromis broke the yoke of Canna Moidart, since the Chemosit fell and dragged the North down with them; and Aistath Fulthor, first among the Reborn Men, heir to a technology whose power he could not really appreciate, a lord respected among the councils of the Pastel City, was running through the foothills of the Monar as if his life depended upon it, without any knowledge of why he ran or what compelled him to do it.

He was a tall man, as are all the Reborn, and a thin one, clad in tunic and trousers of black satin, the contorted yellow crest or ideograph of his House writhing over his breast. On his feet were the curious flimsy shoes his race wears in preference to boots, and at his waist hung a short force knife or *baan,* dug up along with its ancient ceramic scabbard from some desert. His long coarse yellow hair was tangled and damp, and sweat filmed his prominent birdlike features. He came into Dyke Head Moss over the steep and dangerous ground at the head of Rossett Gill, the low rounded hills about him browned with autumn; shot the screes at Surgeon's Gate with arms windmilling to keep his balance and grey dust exploding round him as he went; and gained the valley path in a few long, energetic strides. That the pace he set would have crippled an ordinary man he was unaware. His queer green eyes were blank and unfocused, but with a psychic rather than a physical weariness. In the more foolish and fashionable salons of Viriconium he was held to be the 'most human'of the Reborn; but this was a silly expression (not to say a meaningless one), and if there

was anything more or less human in his face now it was only despair.

Thirty-six hours before, black and incontrovertible, the madness had driven him from his comfortable house on the edge of Minnet Saba, dragged him through the silent predawn streets of the city, along Proton Circuit to the NorthEast Gate, and so up into the icy gullies of the Monar, where it showed him the evil landscapes of quite another country (in his ears was a prolonged metallic moan rising on *afdhn* wind, while against the horizon moved tall and cumbersome shapes) and drove him on with 'Run! Run!'whispered in every chamber of the heart, shrieked in the skull's deep recess and echoed in each atom of his pounding blood. The known world fled away from him. The running hours became simply the spaces between dreams. The great fault between 'now'and 'then'opened itself on him like a chasm and he ran along its rim – poised, taut, forever…

A hundred and forty miles he had come, or more, in a long loop through the hills, old landscapes fomenting in his brain: but the fit was leaving him as he descended Dyke Head Moss, and his senses were returned to him one by one. A stream glittered beside him. Sheep were bleating distantly as the shepherds drove them down from the upland turf to winter pasture in the valley. The air was harsh with the scent of peat and ling-heather, and below him the path fell away in a series of curves and re-entrants and gentle descents to the distant city. Weariness was replacing the mixture of elation and dread which had filled him while he ran. From a state of black exultation he tumbled into one of puzzlement. He had run like this a thousand years before: but from what? Where had he run to? What fears had pullulated in his brain? What curious joy?

Under the brow of Hollin Low Moor he slowed to a walk. His feet and ankles hurt. He sat on a rock by the path to massage them, and his attention was captured by the City, waiting there in its mantle of stillness and distance. Light flared through the haze: heliographing from the riverine curves of the Proton Circuit; phosphorescing from the pleasure-canal at Lowth where, under a setting sun, banks of anemones glowed like triumphal stained glass; signalling from the tiered vivid heights of Minnet-Saba, from the inconceivable pastel towers and plazas of the Atteline Quarter. All was immaculate – illuminated, transfigured, miniature. It attracted him not as a refuge (although he saw himself as a refugee), nor by its double familiarity, but by its long strangeness and obstinacy in the face of Time, celebrated here in the generation (or so it seemed) rather than the reflection of light. Viriconium, the Pastel City; a little cryptic, a little proud, a little mad. Its histories, as forgotten as his own, made of the air a sort of amber, an entrapment; the geometry of its avenues was a wry message from one survivor to another: and its present, like his

own, was but an implication of its past – a dream, a prediction, a brief possibility to be endured.

Thus he fell into a reverie of dispossession, a thin man sitting on a rock in the red wash of sunset, heraldic yellow blazing across his chest, while in his face puzzlement contended with weariness and a certain awe. The light began to fail about him. The valley sounds intensified then died away. A cool wind sprang down from Rossett Gill to rustle like a small animal in the bracken. When he looked up again the City was lost, the evening grey and chilly, and an old man in a long cloak was walking up the path towards him.

He got to his feet and stretched his stiff limbs, Covertly he studied the newcomer's apparel for the Sign of the Locust. When he could not find it he let his hand drop from the hilt of his *baan.*

'Hello, old man,'he said.

The old man stopped. He was barefooted and dusty, bent as if from a long journey undertaken in haste and poverty, and his face was hidden in the depths of his hood. Fulthor would have taken him for a tenant farmer, or one of the small shopkeepers of the south, called away from Soubridge or Lendalfoot to bring a dowry to the wedding of a favourite daughter (copper in the shape of a dolphin, long-hoarded; a small piece of steel equal to the profits of one fig tree), tears and unbleached cloth to the funeral of a younger son. But his cloak was of good fabric, and woven with odd mathematical designs which seemed to ebb and flow in the receding light. And, 'You cannot always be running, Alstath Fulthor,'he whispered, his eyes glittering brightly from the darkness of the hood. 'Why do you waste your time – and the time of your adopted city not less! – away in the brown hills like this?'

Fulthor was intrigued, and a little taken aback. It was a strange place for such a meeting. He shrugged and smiled,

'Why do you waste yours in asking, old man?'he answered.

The old man shivered, and with a quick unconscious movement of the head glanced up at the southern sky before he spoke again. The high, naked shriek of a fish eagle echoed over the fells; but there was no moon yet in the sky.

In a palace like a shell – in Methven's Hall where the Proton Circuit draws itself up into a spiral on a hundred pillars of thin black stone – Methvet Nian, Queen Jane, Queen in Viriconium, who in her youth had taken to the windy birch-stands and glacial lakes of the Rannoch Moor, hunted away by the Chemosit and wild as any moss-trooper's daughter (with the last of the Methven limping and scarred to guard her, a poet and a dead metal bird to guide her, and a giant dwarf to expedite her passage), sat before five false windows in a tall room floored with cinnabar crystal. She was surrounded by precious,

complex objects of forgotten use – machines or sculptures excavated from ruined cities in the Rust Desert beyond Duirinish; curtains of pale, fluctuating light drifted irregularly about the chamber like showers of rain; and through the dreamlike shadows thus created shambled the Queen's Beast-one of the great white sloths of the southern forests, who are said to be the fallen remnants of a star-faring race invited or lured to Earth during the madness of the Afternoon.

Eighty years had passed since Usheen, the first of her beasts, died on Canna Moidart's knife, and in dying sealed the final defeat of the North. Tegeus-Cromis, lay two decades still and dead beneath the fields of sol d'or at Lowth. Methvet Nian was no longer young, even by the standards of the Evening. Still, in her purple eyes there might yet be discerned something of the girl who in the space of one year lost and gained the Last Kingdom of the world: and in the dreaming light where those five false windows showed landscapes to be found nowhere in Viriconium, her age weighed only lightly on her – like the hand of some imaginary child. Inside, the windows flickered. Outside it was autumn; and under a cold moon processions of men with insect faces went silently through the streets.

A curious thing happened to her.

Often in that flickering room the past had come to touch her with quiet persistence, tugging at her sleeve in the effort to capture her attention: white hares in the twilight at Shining Clough Moss or Torside Naze; the long brown sweep of the Rannoch peat moors like a brush stroke in some enormous written language; desert dust piling itself noiselessly in the bleak plazas of ruined Drunmore. But these were no more or less than the sad fingerprints of memory on her brain (she remembered the verses tegeus-Cromis made, the ancient cry of the fish eagles, and his voice out of night and morning): tonight it was something more. The windows flickered; the windows shimmered: the windows said

'Methvet Nian.'

All five went blank and dark.

'Methvet Nian!'

Smoke and snow filled them, a pearly-grey light like dawn over the tottering seracs of some marine glacier in the north beyond the North. It shivered and was wrenched away -'Methvet Nian!'

Fused sand, and a sky filled with mica, the rolling dunes and dry saline wadis of the sempiternal erg. In the fierce air hung a perfect mirage of the City, pastel towers tall and mathematical, cut with strange designs. The wind stooped likeahawk- 'Methvet Nian!'

She approached the windows fatalistically, and with a sense of being drawn or invoked (seeing herself perhaps walk complaisantly

through them and out into some other time). Now they poured out on her a green and submarine radiance, as if the palace she stood in truly were a shell, or a ship full of drowned sailors spinning forever beneath the ancient clammy sea. All other lights in the throne room were dimmed; the sloth whimpered, rearing puzzledly up on its hind legs, great ambered claws extending and retracting nervously.

'Hush,'she said: 'Who wishes to speak to me?'and was still.

'Methvet Nian.'

The deep-sea gloom surged, foamed, blew away, like spindrift off a wave in the invisible wind, only to be replaced by the image of a cavernous, ruined room which seemed to be full of dusty stuffed birds. Moonlight filtered through rents in the walls. An old man stood before her, pentadic, five-imaged. His long domed skull was yellow and fleshless, his eyes green and his lips thin. His skin was so fine and tight as to be translucent, the bones shining through it like jade. His age, she thought, has outstripped mere physical symptoms, and exalted him. His robe was embroidered with subtle gold designs having this property, that in every draught of air they seemed to shift and flow, responsive to each movement of the cloth but independent of it.

She trembled. She put out a hand to touch cold glass.

The cry of gulls rang in her ears, and the sound of a cold grey sea lapping on black sand far away and long ago.

'Do the dead live in that country, then?'she whispered, twisting her fingers in the white fur of the sloth. 'Beyond the windows?'

'Methvet Nian.'

East and South of Monar runs a strip of heathland whose name, when it still had one, was a handful of primitive syllables scattered like a question into the damp wind. It is a deserted and superseded country, that one, full of the monuments and inarticulate ghosts of a race older than Viriconium, younger than the Afternoon Cultures, and possibly more naive than either: a short-lived nation of tribal herdsmen who buried their dead once-yearly in tiered barrows and knew nothing more of their heritage than that it should be avoided. Of the future they knew nothing at all. Worked metal was the death-knell of them, tolling from the crude and ceaseless smithies of the North. Their works, ridge-path and necropolis alike, have now taken on the air of natural features and, overgrown with gorse and young beech, become one with the sombre expanse of long mounds and shallow valleys sloping away to merge imperceptibly with the Rannoch beyond.

This place avoided the poisoned hands of the Afternoon only to age and grow enfeebled instead. Curlews make free of its sad desuetude; hares play in the deep cloughs and sheltered hollows of a

land which has quietly exhausted itself; it ignores the traveller, and gently seeks the night. Here on many an evening in the latter part of the year darkness visits the earth while the pale wreck of the sunset still commands the sky. The air is suffused with brightness yet somehow lacks the power to illuminate. In a moment each declivity has brimmed up with shadow and become the abode of mumbling wind and the shy thin ghosts who never cireamed of the Afternoon or knew its iron, at first or second hand. On just such an evening one autumn, eighty years after the Fall of the North, grey smoke might have been seen issuing from the chimney of a small red caravan parked on an old ridgeway deep in the heart of the heath; and from a considerable hole newly-dug in the ground nearby, the chink of metal on metal -It was a four-wheeled caravan of the type traditionally used by the Mingulay tinker to move his enormous family and meagre equipment along the warm summer roads of the south. Indeed, the south vibrated in it, every panel and peg, lively atrocious designs in electric blue rioting over its sides, its thick spokes picked out in canary yellow, the curved roof a racy purple to throw back the last of the light in a challenge to the sombre crawling umbers of the heath. The hilarious, slovenly children, it seemed, were not long departed, run off snot-nosed to go blackberrying among the brambles. Smoke rose, and a smell of food. Two dusty ponies tethered to the backboard with a bit of frayed rope cropped the short ridgeway turf in noisy self-absorbtion, lop ears cocked to catch the voice of their master who, though rendered invisible by the embankment of fresh sandy soil surrounding his pit, could be heard from time to time punctuating with vile threats and oaths the low monotonous humming of some Rivermouth dirge. But no children returned from the bracken (we hear their voices fade and recede across the long darkness of the heath); and this impatient excavation continued unwearyingly until the light had almost left the sky. Long shadows engulfed the caravan; its chimney ceased to smoke; the ponies shuffled at the end of their tether. Fresh showers of earth added height to the ramparts. Then a peculiar thing happened.

The sound of digging ceased…

A great white light came up out of the pit and flared soundlessly into the sky like a signal to the stars..

(Simultaneously an enormous voice could be heard to shout, OOGABOURINDRA! BORGA! OOGABOURINDRA-BA!) -

And a small figure dressed in the leather leggings of a metal prospector was hurled out of the hole cartwheeling like a horse-chestnut leaf in a March wind, to fall heavily in a heap of harness near the tethered ponies, (who bared their old yellow teeth in brief contempt and immediately resumed their greedy pulling at the turf),

its beard smouldering furiously, its long white hair alight, and all its accoutrements charred. For a moment it sat on the ground as if stunned; beat feebly at itself, muttering the foulest of marsh-oaths from Cladich; then sank back, insensible, silent, smoking. All around, the light that had come up from the earth was fading from white and the invisible colours through a strange series of violets and pinks to darkness and vanishment. A small breeze searched the rowan and thorn for it; shrugged; and departed.

Tomb the Iron Dwarf, acting at the lean end of his life on an impulse he didn't fully understand, had left the Great Brown Waste, his longtime prospecting ground, and in his one-hundred-and-fiftieth year travelled through Methedrin in the spring; where amid the tumbling meltwater and shortlived flower meadows he recalled other times and other journeys. Surprised by his own sentimentality and suddenly aware he was seeking something special, he'd dawdled south down the Rannoch, warming his old bones. 'One last discovery,'he had promised himself, one last communion with ancient metal, and then an end to arthritic nights; but this seemed a strange place to make it. What he might find in a land that hadn't known industry for millenia, what he might return with for the last time to the Pastel City, he couldn't imagine. He had not seen the City for twenty years, or his friend Fulthor. He had never seen the Sign of the Locust.

When he woke up, it was dark, and he was inside his caravan. A tall old man in a hooded cloak bent over him like a question mark in the orange lamplight. Strange designs worked into the weave of the garment seemed to shift and writhe as he moved.

Tomb winced away, his thick gnarled hands yearning for the axe he had not used in a decade (it lay beneath his bed; his armour was there too, packed in a trunk; so his life had gone since the Fall of the North). 'Why have yoti come here, old ghost?'he said. 'I'll cut off your arms!'he whispered as he lost consciousness again, feeling an old cruelty sweep over him like a familiar pain; and then, waking suddenly with his wide astonished eyes staring into that aged face, skin like parchment stretched over a clear lemon-yellow flame, he remembered! Ten thousand grey wings beat down the salty wind like a storm in his head!

'We thought you were dead,'he said. 'We thought you were dead!'And slept

2: Galen Hornwrack and the Sign of the Locust

Autumn. Midnight. The eternal City. The moon hangs over her like an attentive white-faced lover, its light reaching into dusty corners and empty lots. Like all lovers it remarks equally the blemish and the beauty spot – limning the iridium fretwork and baroque spires of the fabled Atteline Plaza even as it silvers the fishy eye of the old woman cutting fireweed and elder twigs among the ruins of the Cispontine Quarter, whose towers suffered most during the War of the Two Queens. The City is a product of her own dreams, a million years of them: now she turns in her sleep, so quietly you can hear the far-off rumour of the newest: white bones, the Song of the Locust, dry mandibles rubbing together in desert nights… or is it only a wind out of Monar, and autumn leaves filling the air, to scrape and patter in the side streets?

In the Artists'Quarter it is that hour of the night when all and nothing seems possible. The bistros are quiet. The entertainments and smoking-parlours are all closed. Even Fat Main Etteilla the fortune teller has shipped her wicked pack of cards, put up for a few hours the shutters of her grubby satin booth and waddled off with her aching ankles and her hacking cough, which is bad tonight. Canker, the *Dark Man* of the cards, has her by the lungs; she leans against a wall to spit in a puddle of moonlight, whispering the word that will hold him back; it falls hollowly into the vibrant, vacant street. The canker, she confides to her shadow, will take her in its own good time; at present she is less concerned about herself than her last customer of the evening. She has a wan belief in her own efficacy, and tells the silent Quarter, 'I did my best, I did my best -,

She did her best -'There is nothing good in the cards spread thus.

'Bogrib, NOTHINGNESS, crosses you, and here is NUMBER FOUR, called by some “the Name Stars”: beware a fire.

'A woman shadows you, POVERTY lies behind you, the Lessing; and before you a discussion, or it may be water.

'Nothing is clear tonight – who is that, running in the alley? I heard steps for a moment in the alley – but see the MANTIS here, praying at the Moon beneath three arches. The first is for something new; the second for injustice; under the third arch all will be made different. Something taken away long ago is now returned.

'These are your thoughts on the matter, to turn this card I must have something more. Thank you. FIVE TOWERS! Do nothing, I beseech you, that you might regret. Fear death from the air, and avoid

the North -'Wait! We have hardly begun! Three more cards remain to be turned!'

– But he went all the same, rapidly down the street and into the Alley of Bakers: a dark self-sufficient figure whose face she never clearly saw, going with a light and dangerous tre ad.

Once in the alley and out of Main Etteilla's earshot (for fear perhaps she might pursue him, predicting, haranguing, or merely coughing up her lungs) he allowed himself to laugh a little, baring his teeth wryly to the grim City, the walls which contained him, the towers which had failed him, the night which covered him; and he quickened his pace, making for the Bistro Californium, that home of all errors and all who err. The air had stilled itself; it was sharp and cold, and his breath hung about him in a cloud. He did not enter the Californium at once but hung like a bird of prey on the edge of the lamplight to see who might await him inside. In this bright, static quadrant of the night's existence the City seemed shattered and fragmentary, tumbled into hard meaningless patterns of light and shade, blue and grey and faded gamboge, grainy of texture and difficult of interpretation. Stray beams of smoky lemon-yellow barred his harsh worn features, his tired hooded eyes. When a dog barked down in the Cispontine Quarter – desultory, monotonous, distant – he seemed to stiffen for a moment; pass his hand over his face; and look puzzledly about him, for all the world like a man who wakes from a nightmare to an empty, buzzing dream, and wonders briefly how his life has led him *here* …

Fear death from the air!

His name was Galen Hornwrack. He was a lord without a domain, an eagle without wings; and he did not fear the air, he loved it. The Way of the Two Queens had ended his boyhood without hope: and he had spent the slow years since hidden away in the mazy alleys of the Artists'Quarter, the better to regret an act of fate which (so it appeared to him) had robbed his existence of any promise or purpose before it was fairly begun. Out of spite against himself or against the world, he never knew which, he had not taken up a profession, learning to use the steel knife instead to cut a living from the streets, shunning his peers and watching himself turn from a young man full of dreams into an older one stuffed with emptiness and fear. Fear death from the air! He feared it at every corner – it yawned at him from every alley's mouth – but never from there, where he would willingly have burned or bled or hung like a corpse from the million-year gallows of his own pain!

Presently he shook himself, laughed harshly, and, certain that the Californium contained no obvious trap or enemy, abandoned the shadows like a viper. One hand hung visible by his side while the

other, beneath his threadbare grey cloak, rested on the hilt of his good plain knife. In that manner he made his way through the notorious chromium portals behind which Rotgob Mungo, a Captain of the North, had in the last days of Canna Moidart's rule laid his vain and valiant plans to break the siege of the Artists'Quarter, only to bleed out his life – albeit more honourably than many of his kin – under the strange axe of Alstath Fulthor.

Californium! The very word is like a bell, tolling all the years of the City – tolling for the mad poets of the Afternoon with all their self-inflicted wounds and desperate drugged sojourns at its rose-coloured glass tables; tolling for their skinless jewelled women who, lolling beneath the incomprehensible frescoes, took tea from porcelain as lucid as a baby's ear; tolling forJiro-San and Adolf Ableson, for Clane and Grishkin and the crimes which sickened their minds in the rare service of Art – their formless, quavering light extinguished now, their names forgotten, their feverish stanzas no more than a faint flush on the face of the world, a fading resonance in the ears of Time!

Californium! – a knell for the new nobles of Borring's court, the unkempt rural harpists who only five centuries ago filled the place with sawdust and thin beer and vomit, beating out their sagas and great lying epics like swords on a Rivermouth anvil while Viriconium, the only city they had ever seen, refurbished itself around them, (remembering, perhaps, its long declining dream) and, at the head of Low Leedale, the cold stronghold of Duirinish levered its way upward stone by stone to bar the way to the wolves of the North. They were here!

Here too came the young tegeus-Cromis, a lord in Methven's halls before the death of his proud sister, morose and ascetic in a bice velvet cloak, eager to stitch the night through with the eerie self-involved notes of a curious Eastern gourd… Californium! Philosophers and tinkers; poetry, art and revolution; princes like vagrants and migrant polemicists with voices soft as a snake's; the absolute beat and quiver of Time, the voice of the City; millennia of verse echo from its chromium walls, drift in little dishonest flakes of sound from that peculiarly frescoed ceiling!

Tonight it was like a grave.

Tonight (with the night in the grip of the Locust, at the mercy of a poetry as icy and formal as an instinct) it was filled with the singular moonlight, bright yet leaden, arctic and elusive, that seeped in from the street. It was cold. And from its windows the City was a broad ingenuous diorama, blue-grey, lemon-yellow, textured like crude paper. Each table cast a precise dull shadow on the floor, as did each table's occupant, caught in frozen contemplation of some crime or moral feebleness; Lord Mooncarrot, he with the receding brow and

rotting Southern estates (gardens filled with perspiring leaden statuary and wild white cats), pondering the blackmail of his wife; Ansel Verdigris the derelict poet, head like an antipodean cockatoo's, fingering his knife and two small coins; Chorica nam Vell Ban, half-daughter of the renegade Norvin Trinor, forgiven but shunned by the society she craved: the persistent moon illuminated them all, and shadows ate their puzzled faces, a handful of rogues and poseurs and failures watching midnight away in the security of their own sour fellowship.

Lord Galen Hornwrack found an empty table and settled himself among them to drink cheap wine and stare impassively into the lunar street, waiting for whatever the long empty night might bring.

(It was to bring him three things: the Sign of the Locust; a personal encounter wan and oblique enough for the bleak white midnight outside; and a betrayal.)

The Sign of the Locust is unlike any other religion invented in Viriconium. Its outward forms and observances – its liturgies and rituals, its theurgic or metaphysical speculations, its daily processionals – seem less an attempt by men to express an essentially human invention than the effort of some raw and independent Idea – a theopneustia, existing without recourse to brain or blood: a Muse or demiurge – to express *itself* It wears its congregation like a disguise: we did not so much create the Sign of the Locust as invite it into ourselves, and now it dons us nightly like a cloak and domino to go abroad in the world.

Who knows exactly where it began, or how? For as much as a century (or as little as a decade: estimates vary) before it made its appearance on the streets, a small group or cabal somewhere in the City had propogated its fundamental tenet – that the appearance of 'reality'is quite false, a counterfeit or artefact of the human senses. How hesitantly they must have crept from alley to alley to confirm one another in their grotesque beliefs! How shy to confide them! And yet: the War had left our spirits as ruinous as the Cispontine Quarter. We were tired. We were hungry. The coming of the Reborn Men was disheartening, unlooked for, punitive. It left us with a sense of having been replaced. How eagerly in the end we clutched at this pitiless, elegant systemization of one simple nihilistic premise!

'The world is not as we perceive it,'maintained the early converts, 'but infinitely more surprising. We must cultivate a diverse view.'This mild (even naive) truism, however, was to give way rapidly – via a series of secret and bloody heretical splits – to a more radical assertion. A wave of murders, mystifying to the population at large, swept the City. It was during this confused period that the Sign itself first came to light, that simple yet tortuous adaptation of the fortune

teller's MANTIS symbol which, cut in steel or silver, swings at the neck of each adherent. Ostlers and merchant princess, soldiers and shopkeepers, astrologers and vagabonds, were discovered sprawled stiffly in the gutters and plazas, strangled in an unknown fashion and their bodies tattooed with symbolical patterns, as the entire council of the Sign, elected by secret ballot from the members of the original cabal, tore itself apart in a grotesque metaphysical dispute. A dreadful sense of immanence beset the City. 'Life is a blasphemy,'announced the Sign. 'Procreation is a blasphemy, for it replicates and fosters the human view of the universe.'

Thus the Sign established itself; coming like a coded message from nowhere. Now its apologists range from wheelwright to Court ascetic; it is scrawled on every alley wall to fluoresce in the thin bluish moonlight; it rustles like a dry wind – or so it's said – even in the corridors of Methven's hall. Its complicated sub-sects, with their headless and apparently aimless structures, issue many bulletins. We counterfeit the 'real', they claim, by our very forward passage through time, and thus occlude the actual and essential. One old man feeding a dog might by the power of his spirit maintain the existence of an entire street – the dog, the shamble of houses with their big-armed women and staring children, the cobbles wet with an afternoon's rain, the sunset seen through the top of a ruined tower; and what mysteries lie behind this imperfect shadow-play? What truths? They process the streets impulsively, trying to defeat the Real, and hoping to come upon a Reborn Man.

Such a procession now made its way toward the Bistro Californium, given up like a breath of malice by the night. It was quick and many-legged in the gloom. It was silent and unnerving. The faces which composed it were nacreous, curiously inexpressive as they yearned on long rubbery necks after their victim. Surprised among the Cispontine ruins not an hour before, this poor creature fled in fits and starts before them, falling in and out of doorways and sobbing in the white moonlight. A single set of running footsteps echoed in the dark. All else was a parched whisper, as if some enormous insect hovered thoughtfully above the chase on strong, chitinous wings.

Since their condition allows them no deeper relief, the merely selfish are raddled with superstition; salt, mirror, 'touch wood'are ritual bribes, employed to ensure the approval of an already indulgent continuum. The true solepsist, however, has no need of such toys. His presiding superstition is himself. Galen Hornwrack, then, cared as much for the Sign of the Locust as he did for anything not directly connected with himself or his great loss: that is to say, not in the least. So the first clue to their coming confrontation went unrecognised by him – how could it be otherwise?

Glued to its own feeble destiny in the leaden blue moonlight, the clique at the Bistro Californium regarded its navel with surprised disgust. Verdigris the poet was trying to raise money against the security of a ballad he said he was writing. He bobbed and hopped fruitlessly from shadow to harsh shadow, attempting first to cheat the fat Anax Hermax, epileptic second-son of an old Mingulay fish family, then a sleepy prostitute from Minnet-Saba who only smiled maternally at him, and finally Mooncarrot, who knew him of old. Mooncarrot laughed palely, his eyes focused elsewhere, and flapped his gloves. 'Oh dear, oh no, old friend,'he whispered murderously. 'Oh dear, oh no!'The words fell from his soft mouth one by one like pieces of pork. Verdigris was frantic. He plucked at Mooncarrots sleeve. 'But listen!'he said. He had nowhere to sleep; he had – it has to be admitted – debts too large to run away from; worse, he actually did feel verses crawling about somewhere in the back of his skull like maggots in a corpse, and he needed refuge from them in some woman or bottle. He nodded his head rapidly, shook that dyed fantastic crest of hair. 'But listen!'he begged; and, standing on one leg in a pool of weird moonlight, he put his hands behind his back, stretched his neck and recited,

My dear when the grass rolls in tubular billows
And the face of the ewe lamb bone white in the meadows
Sickens and slithers down into the mallows
Murder will soothe us and settle our fate;
Hallowed and pillowed in the palm of tomorrow
We tremble and trouble the hearts of the hollow:
The teeth of the tigers that stalk in the shallows Encrimson the foam at the fisherman's feet!

No-one paid him any attention. Hornwrack sat slumped at the edge of the room where he could keep an eye on both door and window (he expected nobody – it was a precaution – it was a habit), his long white hand curled round the handle of a black jug, a smile neglected on his thin lips. Though he loathed and mistrusted Verdigris he was faintly amused by this characteristic display. The poet now choked on his horrid extemporary, mid-line. He was becoming exhausted, staring about like a bullock in an abattoir, moving here and there in little indecisive runs beneath the strange Californium frescoes. Only Hornwrack and Chorica nam Veil Ban were left to importune; he hesitated then turned to the woman, with her pinched face and remote eyes. She will give him nothing, thought Hornwrack. Then we shall see how badly off he really is.

'I *dined* with the hertis-Padnas,'she explained confidentially, not looking at Verdisgris as he bobbed uxoriously about in front of her. 'They were too kind.'She seemed to see him for the first time and her imbecile smile opened like a flower.

'Muck and filth!'screamed Verdigris. 'I didn't ask for a social calendar!'

Shivering, he forced himself to face Hornwrack.

A grey shadow materialized behind him at the door and wavered there like some old worn lethal dream.

Hornwrack flung his chair back against the wall and fumbled for his plain steel knife. (Moonlight trickled down its blade and dripped from his wrist.) Verdigris, who had not seen the shadow in the doorway, gaped at him in grotesque surprise. 'No, Hornwrack,'he said. His tongue, like a little purple lizard, came out and scuttled round his lips. 'Please. I only wanted -'

'Get out of my way,'Hornwrack told him. 'Go on.'

Scarlet crest shaking with relief, he gave a great desperate 'shout of laughter and sprang away in time to give Hornwrack one good look at the figure which now tottered through the door.

A thin skin only, taut as a drumhead, separates us from the future: events leak through it reluctantly, with a faint buzzing sound, if they make any noise at all – like the wind in an empty house before rain. Much later, when an irreversible process of change had hold of them both, he was to learn her name – Fay Glass, of the House of Sleth, famous thousand and more years ago for its unimaginably oblique acts of cruelty and compassion. But for now she was a mere taint echo of the yet-to-occur, a Reborn Woman with eyes of a fearful honesty, haphazardly cropped hair an astonishing lemon colour, and a carriage awkward to the point of ugliness and absurdity (as if she had forgotten, or somehow never learned, how a human-being stands). Her knees and elbows made odd and painful angles beneath the thick 'velvet cloak she wore; her thin fingers clutched some object wrapped in waterproof cloth and tied up with a bit of coloured leather. Muddy and travel stained, there she stood, in an attitude of confusion and fear, blinking at Hornwrack's knife proferred like a sliver of midnight and true murder in the eccentric Californium shadows; at Verdigris'disgusting red crest; at Mooncarrot and his kid gloves, smiling and whispering delightedly, 'Hello my dear. Hello my little damp parsnip -'

'I,'she said. She fell down like a heap of sticks.

Verdigris was on her at once, slashing open the bundle even as her fingers relaxed.

'What's this?'he muttered to himself. 'No money! No money!'With a sob he threw it high into the air. It turned over once or twice, landed with a thud, and rolled into a corner.

Hornwrack went up and kicked him off. 'Go home and rot, Verdigris.'He gazed down thoughtfully.

Perhaps a decade after the successful conclusion of the War of the

Two Queens it had become apparent that a large proportion of the Reborn could not manage the continual effort neccessary to separate their dreams, their memories and the irrevocable present in which they now discovered themselves. Some illness or dislocation had visited them during the long burial. No more, it was decided, should be resurrected until the others had found a cure for this disability. In the interim the worst afflicted would leave the City to form communes and self-help groups dotted across the uplands and along the littorals of the depopulated North. It was a callous and unsatisfactory solution, except to those who felt most threatened by the Reborn; ramshackle and interim as it was, however, it endured – and here we find them seventy years on, in deserted estuaries full of upturned fishing boats and hungry gulls, under fretted fantastic gritstone edges and all along the verges of the Great Brown Waste – curious, flourishing, hermetic little colonies, some dedicated to music or mathematics, others to weaving and the related arts, others still to the carving of enormous mazes out of the sodden clinker and blowing sands of the Waste. All practise, besides, some form of the ecstatic dancing first witnessed by Tomb the Dwarf in the Great Brain Chamber at Knarr in the Lesser Rust Desert.

The search for a cure is forgotten; the attempt to come to terms with Evening abandoned. They prefer now to drift, to surrender themselves to the currents of that peculiar shifting interface between past, present and wholly imaginary: acting out partial memories of the Afternoon and weaving into them whatever fragments of the Evening they are able to perceive. Privately they call this twilight country of perception 'the margins'; and some believe that by committing themselves wholly to it they will in the end achieve not only a complete liberation from linear time but also some vast indescribable affinity with the very fabric of the 'real'. They are mad, to all intents and purposes: but perfectly hospitable.

From one of these communities Fav Glass had come, down all the long miles to the south. The 'weird filaments of silver threading the grey velvet of her cloak; her inability to articulate; her palpable confusion and *petit mal:* all spoke eloquently of her origins. But there was nothing to explain what had brought her here, or why she had failed to contact the Reborn of the City (who without exception – full of guilt perhaps over their abandonment of their cousins – would have feted and cared for her as they did every visitor from the North); nothing to account for her present pitiable condition. Hornwrack touched her gently with the toe of his boot. 'Lady?'he said absently. He did not precisely 'care'-he was, after all, incapable of that; but the night had surprised him, preseintiing him with a face he had never seen (or wanted to see) before: his curiosity had been piqued for the

first time in many years.

The City caught its breath; the blue hollow lunar glow, streetlight of some necrotic, alternate Viriconium, flickered; and when at last something prompted him to look up again, the servants of the Sign were before him, filing in dumb processional through the chromium Californium door.

Chorica nam VeIl Ban left her table hurriedly and went to sit beside Lord Mooncarrot, whom she loathed. Her shoulders were as thin as a coat-hanger and from the folds of her purple dress there fluttered like exotic moths old invita tion cards with deckled edges and embossed silver script. Mooncarrot for his part dropped both his rancid smile and his yellow gloves – plop! – and now found himself too rigid to pick them up again. Under the table these two fumbled for one another's shaking hands, to clasp them in a tetanus of anxiety and self-interest while their lips curled with mutual distaste and their curdled whispers trickled across the room.

'Hornwrack, take care!'

(Much later he was to realise that even this simple counsel was enmeshed in incidental entendres. Not that it matters: at the time it was already too late to follow.)

'Take care, Hornwrack!'advised a voice of wet rags and bile; a voice which had plumbed the gutters of its youth for inspiration and never clambered out again. It was Verdigris, sidling up behind him to hop and shuffle like a demented flamingo at the edge of vision. What abrupt desperate betrayal was he nerving himself up for? What unforgivable retreat? 'Oh, go away,'said Hornwrack. He felt like a man at the edge of some crumbling sea-cliff, his back to the drop and the unknown waves with the foam in their teeth. 'What do you want here?'he asked the servants of the Sign.

By day they were drapers, dull and dishonest: by day they were bakers. Now, avid-eyed, as hollow and expectant as a vacuum, they stood in a line regarding the woman at his feet with a kind of damp, empty longing, their faces lumpen and ill-formed in the hideous light – moulded, it seemed, from some impure or desecrated white wax – weaving about on long thin necks, grunting and squinting in a manner halfapologetic, half-aggressive. Their spokesman, their priest or tormentor, was a beggar with the ravaged yellow mask of a saint. A surviving member of the original cabal, he wielded extensive financial power though he lived on the charity of certain important Houses of the City. A rich bohemian in his youth, he had refuted the ultimate reality even of the self (staggering, after nights of witty and irreproachable polemic, down the ashen streets at dawn, afraid to destroy himself lest by that he should somehow acknowledge that he had lived). He no longer interpreted but rather embodied the Sign,

and when he stood forward and began to work his reluctant jaws back and forth, it spoke out of him.

'You do not exist,'it said, in a voice like a starving imbecile, articulating slowly and carefully, as if speech were a new invention, a new unlooked-for interruption of the endless reedy Song. 'You are dreaming each other.'It pointed to the woman. 'She is dreaming you all. Give her up.'It swallowed dryly, clicking its lips, and became still.

Before Hornwrack could reply, Verdigris – who, filled by circumstance with a bilious and lethal despair, had indeed been nerving himself up, although not for a betrayal -stepped unexpectedly out of the shadows. He had had a bad afternoon at the cards with Fat Main Etteilla; verse was scraping away at the wards of his skull like a picklock in a rusty keyhole; he was a rag of a man, in horror of himself and everything else that lived. To the spokesman of the Sign he offered a ridiculous little bow. 'Pigs are dreaming you, you tit-suckers!'he sneered; and, squawking like a drunken juggler, winked up at Hornwrack.

Hornwrack was astonished.

'Verdigris, are you mad?'

'You're done for, at least!'was all the poet said. 'It's black murder now.'A perverted grin crossed his face. 'Unless -Suddenly he extended a dirty avaricious claw, palm upwards, calloused and ink-stained from the pen. 'If you want her you'll have to pay for her, Hornwrack!'he hissed. 'You can't fight them on your own.'He glanced sideways at the Sign, shuddered. 'Those eyes!'he whispered. 'Quick,'he said, 'before my guts turn to prune juice. Enough for a bed, enough for a bottle and I'm your man! Eh?'As he watched Hornwrack's incomprehension dissolve into disgust, he shivered and sobbed. 'You can't fight them on your own!'

Hornwrack looked at him. He looked down at Fay Glass, insensible yet invested – a mysterious engine of fate. He looked at the spokesman of the Sign. He shrugged.

'Peddle your knife somewhere else,'he told the poet. 'These people have never had cause to quarrel with me. They should remember that. They have made a simple mistake in the identity of this unfortunate woman (who is a cousin of mine, I now see, from Soubridge), and they are leaving.'

He stood there feeling surprised. He had meant to say something else.

'You do not exist,'whispered the Sign. Ansel Verdigris chuckled.

Shadows flickered on the wall. Knives were out in the eerie light.

'Oh very well,'sighed Galen Hornwrack. 'Very well'

Possessed by the sudden instinctive cannibalism of the baboon (our unshakeable mahout, seated in the skull these million centuries)

the combatants throw themselves at one another: the flesh parting like lips, wounds opening like avid mouths, precious fluids of the heart spent in one quick salivation; the bloody flux…

Hornwrack watches at the celebration of his own genius, helpless and a little awed. He has done nothing during his self-imposed exile from humanity if not learn his trade. A cold, manufactured rage, counterfeit of an emotion without which he cannot do his work, laps him round. The good steei knife, conjured from its sheath like a memory, settles comfortably in his hand. He can no longer influence himself, and treads the measures of his trade – the cut, the leap, the feint. Like ajuggler in the Atteline Plaza he tumbles to avoid the despairing counterstroke (the blade whickering in beneath his cheekbone, the displaced air brushing feather-like his hollowed cheek). Blood fountains in the mad Californium light, the colour of old plums. That is no new colour. (All the while the girl lay between his shuffling feet like a stone, her eyes full of pain and disbelief.) The knife goes home, and goes home again in the queasy gloom. His blood is now inextricably mixed with that of the Sign, daubed on his bare forearms, greasy underfoot, a fraternity of murder and pain…

(Somewhere behind him Verdigris was struggling, his face luminous with terror, his mouth a gargoyle's spouting a filth of verses, some drainpipe lyric of relaxing sphincters and glazed eyes. 'Remember this, Hornwrack!'he shouted. 'Remember this!'

Hornwrack never heard him.) Three, perhaps four, fall before him, and then the mouthpiece of the Sign squeezes into view from the bloody melee like a face surfacing from the bottom of a dream – long, yellow, smeared with blood, triangular and expressionless as a wasp's – the breath huffing in and out like dry inhalations of some machine, the breath of the insect whispering the deadly symbolic secrets of the cabal, the arid rustling visions of bone and desert – until Hornwrack's knife thumps him squarely in the hollow between collarbone and trapezoid with a sound like a chisel in a block of wood, to end eighty years of fear and doubt. At the point of his death, electricity flares between them, as it the whole cabal gave up its heart in the one despairing, vomited word which was simultaneously his warning and his triumph.

Hornwrack supported the corpse by its throat, struggling to pull out his knife. The yellow face grinned at him, laved by its own punctured carotid. He let it slip away, back down into his nightmares.

For a moment he felt quite old and hopeless. All around him shadows were slipping from the place in defeat -silently, like sapient grey baboons quitting some foggy midnight rock in a warmer latitude, fur blood-streaked, the game up. In the middle of the room Verdigris had fallen to his knees and, clutching one gory thigh to stem the

bleeding, was slashing feebly at retreating hamstrings. As Hornwrack watched he fell on his face and dragged himself off into a corner. Hornwrack ran out into the street, shouting. Brought up short by the dazzle of moonlight, he could hear only the rapid patter of feet. He stood there for a long time, shaking his head puzzledly, growing cold as the clock moved from midnight to one, the knife forgotten in his hand; then he went back inside.

Verdigris had gone, through the rear entrance and out into the thousand gutters'of the Quarter, the girl's bundle with him; even now he would be trying to sell it in some derelict shambles at the dark end of an alley. Mooncarrot and Chorica nam Vell Ban were gone, to spend the rest of the night together in grey, narcissistic embrace, each seeing in the other's unresponsive face a mirror – and part with revulsion as the spasm of fear which had briefly united them faded in the spreading light of dawn. The Sign had gone, and its dead with it. The queer Californium frescoes looked down on an empty and echoing space, and, standing awkwardly at the hub of it, staring about her in characteristic frozen panic, the Reborn Woman Fay Glass, a harbinger, a messenger in a velvet cloak. Her cropped yellow hair was spiky with congealing blood and she was trying desperately to speak.

. 'I,'she said. 'In my youth,'she whispered. Her eyes were blue as acid.

'Look,'he told her, 'you had better leave before they come back.'A place in his left side ached unbearably. He felt dull '. and fatigued. 'I'm sorry about the bundle,'he said. 'If I see Verdigris… but I expect your people can help you.'He put his hand through the rip in his soft leather shirt. It came out warm and sticky. He bit his knuckles. 'I'm hurt,'he explained, 'and I can't help you any more. '

'In my youth I – '

She was plainly mad (and attracted madness too, focusing all the long lunacies of the City like a glass catching the rays of some ironic invisible sun). He wanted no dependants. He put out a hand to touch her shoulder.

Immediately he experienced a shocking moment of blankness, a lapse like the premature tumble into sleep of an overtired brain. It was accompanied by something which resembled an intense flash of light. He heard himself say, quite inexplicably: 'There are no longer any walls.'Shadows rushed out of the Californium corners and swallowed him: the Afternoon was vibrating in him like a malign chord. Somewhere out there in the millenial dark night, tall ancient towers howled on a rising wind. He approached them over many days, fearfully, across tracts of moorland and dissected peat, scoured ridges and deep sumps. The 'water was corrupted and undrinkable, the paths difficult to find. Finally the hidden city composed itself before him

like a dream, but by then it was too late… Simultaneously (in a vision overlaid like delicately coloured glass) he was in some other place. A settlement huddled on the verge of the Great Brown Waste. Behind it steep slopes covered with sickly dwarf-oak swept up to an extensive gritstone escarpment running north and south, its black bays and buttresses looming up against the fading light. A few flakes of snow hung in the bitter air: and, silhouetted against the pale-green sky, enormous insectile shapes marched in slow processions across the clifftop.

'No,'cried Galen Hornwrack. He shook himself like a dying rat and pushed the woman away. 'What?'he said, staring at her. He was trembling all over. Then, with his hand clapped to his left side and his face haggard, he staggered out of the Californium, feeling the dry, febrile touch of wings or madness on his skin.

Behind him the Reborn Woman moved her lips desperately, a child making faces into a mirror.

'In my youth,'she said to his retreating back, 'I made my small contribution. Venice becomes like Blackpool, leaving nothing for anybody. Rebellion is good and necessary. I -'The Californium became silent about her. There was nothing left but the doorway, a trapezium of blue and grey and faded gamboge – the reflection of the City in a deep well of moonlight on an autumn night. Nothing was left but the wind out of Monar, a little blood, the falling leaves. She began to weep with frustration.

'I-'.

Viriconium. Hornwrack. Three worlds colliding in his head. As he rain aimlessly up and down the alleyways at the periphery of the Quarter, dark, viscid peat groughs yawned like traps beneath his feet. The wind hissed in his ears. Looming against an electric sky, that terrible haunted crag with its slow purposeful visitation! In the shattered moonlight of the City he stumbled into doors and walls, his limbs jerking erratically as if the vision accidentally vouchsafed him had been accompanied by some injection of poison into his nervous system. His clothes were torn and he was caked with blood; he couldn't remember where he lived; he couldn't imagine where he'd been. It was this fatal disorientation which camouflaged the sound of footsteps following him: and by the time he had remembered who he was – by the time those other landscapes had faded sufficiently for him to appreciate his situation – it was too late.

Out of the shadows that curtained the alley wall another shadow hurled itself; across a band of moonlight a white perverted face was launched at his own; he was carried to the floor by a tremendous blow in his damaged side, as if someone had run full-tilt into him in the bruised yellow gloom. Thin, hispid arms embraced him, and close to

his ear a voice that smelt of wet rags and bile – a voice pulped by self-indulgence and curdled with vice – hissed, 'Pay up, Hornwrack, or you'll rot in the gutter! I swear it!'

The hands which now scuttled over him were lean and fearful, full of horrible vitality. They discovered his purse and emptied it. They stumbled on his knife; retreated in confusion; then snatched it up and drove it repeatedly against the flagstones until it shattered. Overcome by this ambitious tactic they abandoned him suddenly, like frightened rats. Something heavy and foul was flung down on the pavement near his head. A single exotic shriek of laughter split the night: running footsteps, the signature of the Low City, faded into echoes, stranding him sick and helpless on this barren, reeling promontory of his empty life.

Now he realised that he had been stabbed a second time, close to the original wound. He grinned painfully at the ironical shards of his own blade, winking up at him from the cracked flags, each one containing a'tiny, perfect reflection of the mad retreating figure of the balladeer, coxcomb flapping in the homicidal night. 'I'll have your lights, you bloody cockatoo, you rag,'he whispered, 'you bloody poet!'But now he wanted only his familiar quarters in the Rue Sepile, the dry rustle of mice among the dead geraniums and the murmured confidences of the whores on the upper stair.

After a while this hallucination of security became so magnetic that he hauled himself to his feet and began the journey, clinging to the alley wall for comfort. Almost immediately he was enveloped in a foul reek. He had stumbled over Verdigris'abandoned rubbish: the Reborn Woman's bundle, still wrapped in its waterproof cloth. For the life of him he couldn't think why it should stink so of rotting cabbage.

When he unwrapped it to find out he discovered the hacked-off head of an insect, rotting and seeping and *fully eighteen inches from eye to globular eye.*

He dropped it with a groan and fled, through the warrens behind Delphin Square, past the grubby silent booth of Fat Main Etteilla and the crumbling cornices of the Camine Auriale, his feet echoing down the empty colonnades, his wounds aching in the cold. *Things pass behind me when my head is turned,* he thought, and he knew then that the future was stalking him; that a consummation lay in ambush. He stared wildly up at the Name Stars in case they should reflect the huge unnatural change below. From Delphin all the way to the Plaza of Unrealized Time he went, straight as an arrow across the Artists'Quarter to the narrow opening of the Rue Sepile, to those worm-eaten rooms on the lower landing with the ceilings that creaked all night…

… Where the dawn found him out at last and his eighty year exile

ended (although he was not to know that at the time).

All night he had lain in a painful daze broken by short violent dreams and fevers in which he received hints and rumours of the World's end. Fire shot from the ruined observatory at Alves, and a great bell tolled where none had hung for millenia. *A woman with an insect's head* stuffed his wounds with sand; later, she led him through unfamiliar colonnades scoured by a hot dry wind – the streets crackled underfoot, carpeted with dying yellow locusts! Main Etteilla, sweating in the prophetic booth – 'Fear death from the air!'- opened her hands palm upwards and placed them on the table. He was abandoned by his companions in the deep wastes and crawled about groaning while the Earth flew apart like an old bronze flywheel under the wan eye of a moon which resolved itself finally into the face of his boy, impassive in the queasy light of a single candle.

'What, then?'he whispered, trying to push the lad away.

It was the last hour of the night, when the light creeps up between the shutters and spreads across the damp plaster like a stain, musty and cold. Outside, the Rue Sepile lay exhausted, prostrate, smelling of stale wine. He coughed and sat up, the sheets beneath him stiff with his own coagulating blood. Pulling himself, hand over hand, out of the hole of sleep, he found his mouth dry and rancid, his injured side a hollow pod of pain.

'There are people to see you,'said the boy. And, indeed, behind his expressionless face other faces swam, there in the corner beyond the candlelight. Hornwrack shuddered, clawing at the bloody linen.

'Do nothing,'he croaked.

The boy smiled and touched his arm, with 'Better get up my lord,'the gesture ambivalent, the smile holding compassion perhaps, perhaps contempt; affection or embarrassment. They knew nothing about one another despite a hundred mornings like this, years of stiff and bloody sheets, delirium, hot water and the stitching needle. How many wounds had the boy bound, with pinched face and capable undemonstrative fingers? How many days had he spent alone with the dry smell of the geraniums, the Rue Sepile 'buzzing beyond the shutters, waiting to hear of a death?

'Better get up. '

'Will you remember me?'

He shivered, and his hand found the boy's thin shoulder. 'Will you remember me?'he repeated, and when no answer was forthcoming swung his legs over the edge of the bed.

'I'm coming,'he said with a shrug; so they waited for him in the shadows of his room, silent and attentive as the boy bathed and dressed his wounds, as the candle faded and grey light crept in under the door. Fay Glass the madwoman with her message from the North;

Alstath Fulthor, lord of the Reborn and a great power in Viriconium since the War of the Two Queens; and between them the old bent man in the hooded robe, who peered out through a chink in the mouldy shutter and said dryly, 'I can connect nothing with nothing today. But look how the leaves fall!'

3: A Fish Eagle in Viriconium

Tomb the Dwarf's return to Viriconium, his adoptive city, was accomplished at no great pace. The passage of two or three days placed the site of his abortive excavations and near-incineration behind him to the south-east. The Monar massif was on his right hand (its peaks as yet no more than a threat of ice, a white hanging frieze hardly distinguishable from a line of cloud), while somewhere off to his left ran that ancient, paved and – above all – crowded way which links the Pastel City with its eastern dependencies – Faldich, Cladich and Lendalfoot by the sea. This latter route he avoided, preferring the old drove-roads and greenways, out of sentimentality rather than any conscious desire to be alone. He remembered something about them from his youth. Although he was not quite sure what it might be, he sought it stubbornly in the aimless salients and gentle swells of the dissected limestone uplands which skirt the mountains proper, haunted by the liquid bubble of the curlew and the hiss of the wind in the blue moor-grass.

He gave little thought to his rescuer from the past. The man had vanished again while he slept, leaving nothing but a half-dream in which the words 'Viriconium'and 'Moon'were repeated many times and with a certain sense of urgency. (Tomb had woken ravenous in the morning, abandoned the new pit immediately, despite its promise, and gone in search of him – full at first of a curious joy, then at least in hope; and finally when he failed to find so much as a footprint in the newly-turned earth, with a wry amusement at his own folly.) He was, as he had put it more than once, a dwarf and not a philosopher. Events involved him utterly; he encountered them with optimism and countered them with instinct; in their wake he had few opinions, only memories. He asked for no explanations.

Still, curiosity was by no means dead in him; and since he could not go to the Moon he moved west across the uplands instead, toward Viriconium, In a region of winding dales a further queer event overtook him.

Fissuring the high plateau, so that from above it looked like a grey and eroded cheese, these deep little dry-bottomed valleys were dreamy and untenanted. Hanging thickets of thorn and ash made them difficult of access (except where some greenway deserted impulsively its grassy sheep-run to follow an empty stream bed, plunge through tumbled and overgrown intake walls, and nose like a dog among the mossy ruins of some long-abandoned village): and each was guarded by high, white, limestone bastions. Into one such came the dwarf at the end of a warmish October afternoon, the wheels of his caravan

creaking on a disused track drifted with ochre leaves. Reluctant to disturb the elegant silence of the beechwoods, he descended slowly, looking for a place to pass the night. The air was warm, the valley dappled with honey-coloured light. Summer still lived here in the smell of the wild garlic, the dance of the insects in the steep glades, and the slow fall of a leaf through a slanting ray of sun.

The curves of the track revealed to him first a forgotten hamlet in the valley floor – then, swimming above that in a kind of amber glow, the enormous cliff which dominated it.

The village was long dead. Past it once had flowed a stream called the Cressbrook: but there was no-one left now to call it anything, and it had retreated shyly underground leaving only a barren strip of stones to separate the relics of human architecture from the vast limestone cathedral on its far bank. There was no water for his ponies, but Tomb turned them out of their shafts anyway; he felt magnetized, drawn, on the verge of some discovery. For this they bore him no more or less ill-will than usual, and he could hear them tearing at the damp grass as he pottered along the bank of the vanished brook. But he couldn't get comfortable 'there, or amid the contorted and lichenous boughs of the reverted orchard with its minute sour apples – and after a while he shook his head, staring puzzledly about him. Something had attracted him, and yet the place was nothing more than a collection of bramble-filled intakes, grassy mounds, and heaps of stone colonized by nettle and elderberry, its air of desuetude and loss magnified by the existence of the cliff above -That cliff! That aching expanse of stone, with its ancient jackdaw colonies, its great ragged swathes of ivy and its long mysterious yellow stains! It hung up there, every line of it precise in the amber glow, every scalloped overhang thick with brown darkness, every leaning ash tree, golden and exact against its own black shadow. Every buttress was luminous. The gloomy and suggestive caves worn in its face by a million years of running water seemed more likely places of habitude than the pitiful handful of relics facing it across the dry stream: the shadow of a bird, flickering for a moment across an acre of vibrant white stone, invested it with some immemorial yet transitory significance (some distillation or heirloom of a thousand twilights, a billion such shadows fossilized impalpably in the rock): it was like a vast old head – imperial, ironic and compelling -Eventually he cooked himself a meal and ate it squatting comfortably on the step of the caravan. Smoke from his fire became trapped in the inversion layers and drifted down the little valley. Evening came closer and yet never seemed to arrive – as if the valley and its great white guardian were removed from the ordinary passage of time. The sun dipped forever into the greyness and yet never sank. The air cooled, but so slowly. No wind came. Tomb the

Dwarf scratched his crotch, yawned. He stood up to massage the deep ache of an old back-wound.

He fed the ponies. Then he went to look at the cliff.

At first, a little out of breath after the ascent of the vegetated scree beneath, he was content merely to stand at the bottom of it and crane his neck to watch the jackdaws. The rock was warm: he placed the palm of his hand against it, flat. The earth beneath his boots was filled with the smell of autumn: he breathed deeply, cocking an eye at a hanging rib, a soaring corner, an ivy-filled crack.

He stood there at the beginning of it where every line led upward, then he began to climb.

He had remembered what was haunting him.

He climbed slowly and amiably, placing his feet with care; here jamming a fist into a crack, there balancing his way across some steep slab while empty space burnt away beneath him like a fuse: and with him as he climbed went the long barren limestone scars of his youth, burning and distant under a foreign sun – the baking hinterlands of the Mingulay Peninsula in summer – the stones so bright at midday they hurt the eyes – the tinkers'caravans string 'themselves out like gems across the Mogadon Littoral – the sea-cliffs blaze in a fifty mile arc from Radiopolis to Thing 10, while, high above the stoneheaps and the thorny rubbish in the dry gullies, patrols a single lammergeyer, a speck on the burning bowl of the air! Each place or event he now saw miniaturised and arid, as if sealed in clear glass. He regretted none of them – but he was glad on the whole to have. exchanged them for the softer airs of the north; and the memory identified, the haunting laid, he let it slip away… Soon he was able to rest on a shaggy platform some three 'hundred feet from his starting point and perhaps two hundred more above the caravan on the valley floor. Here there was a cool breeze, and he could watch the jackdaws pursue their millenial evening squabble beneath him; 'harrying one another from roost to roost then exploding away into the clear air in a clatter of wings and sneers – to soar and drift and drop like stones into the treetops below before returning to the bramble-ledges to begin the whole tedious argument over again… He took off his belt and with it anchored himself among the roots of the yew with which he shared his perch. The air around him cooled; the light. began imperceptibly to fade; the long shoulders of the plateau receded north before him, horizon after horizon like grey pigeon feathers set against the enamelled blues and yellows of the sky. Across the valley he could no longer distinguish individual ash trees – crowned with a continuous lacy fretwork of branches, the sun red and unmoving above it, the far slope rose dark and sullen like a vast earthwork.

. And as he watched, a head began to raise itself above that

earthwork.

It was such a brief glimpse that later he was unable to describe it coherently – by then, of course, it no longer mattered. The thing revealed itself in total silence, and by parts. First the drooping, jointed antennae, in constant nervous motion, were lifted above the trees; then the great globular eyes followed them, dull and faceted, set in a wedge-shaped carapace like the stained and polished skull of a dead horse; finally came the mouthparts, working like a machine. Two trembling, oddly-curved forelimbs appeared, and, braced against the earth's dark edge (although they left not the slightest mark), levered this shocking mask high above the dwarf's stance. He never saw the rest of the creature. The valley winked out below him; the cliff lurched and spun; he shuddered, and heard a thin piping noise coming out of his own mouth -Then it was gone.

He retained the impression of something fading, of a noise he had never actually heard gradually diminishing from some unimaginable crescendo – as if an invisible energy dissipating itself like water dribbling away under a stone: then he felt the rough powdery bark of the yew against his sweating hand; the cry of the jackdaws came back to him (faint at first, as though from a vast distance); the valley of the Cressbrook was once more as it had been -Such a brief glimpse.

The sun sank, the dark welled in: but the small hunched figure on the cliff remained – chin on knees, singed grey hair moving in the night wind, expression quizzical. When he eventually got up to leave his ledge and begin the careful retreat, he saw suddenly that it was scattered with hundreds of little luminous insects. Leaping and glittering in an excess of life and energy, they scuttled over his feet, flickered between the roots of the yew, and tumbled in a constant rain over the edge, spilling into the depths like sparks. He could not see where they came from; and when he tried to pick some of them up they evaded him.

During his descent he had expected to see them falling past him into space: but when a few minutes later the difficulties eased and he was able to look up, they had gone, and he couldn't even see the ledge.

*

In a languor of puzzlement and dried blood, then, his wounds gaping at him every time he closed his eyes, Galen Hornwrack abandoned his familiar rooms, his stale but bearable captivity.

Nothing was said. Nothing was explained. The shrewd whores watched him go (moving abstractedly from window to window, fingers raised to a drooping underlip, a leaded cheek, a favourite comb). The boy, too, followed him with uncommunicative eyes. Did he understand what had happened? Would he wait for as much as a day before drifting away into some desperate, motiveless new liaison? Hornwrack could not care for him (both of them bore too obviously the signature of the City, the impassive self-indulgence, the narcissism which precludes compassion): but he'had a sudden quick vision of the boy's thin shoulders hunched against a corrosive yellow lamplight; of dripping brickwork and energetic shadows; and he found himself searching for something to say in farewell, some gift or acknowledgement. Nothing came, so he said nothing, and let the inevitable profitless curves of the Rue Sepile carry him out of sight.

Eventually, he knew, his present inertia would be replaced by a faint bitterness, a sense of betrayal which, though directed away from himself, would yet be experienced on behalf of the boy. In this way he managed his crippled emotions. For now he could only watch covertly the faces of his unwelcome companions, waiting for some indication of their purpose. Beneath his cloak he had hidden his second best knife, a thing with a peculiar hilt and an old black stain he could not remove.

They had fetched him a horse, though he hated that method of travel, and urged him silently to get up on it. Now, the Plaza of Unrealized Time and its shabby dependencies behind them, they shepherded him through the Low City. Alves passed like a dream, its breached copper dome and sprawling rookeries lapped in the silence of desuetude. Along the Camine Auriale a drizzling rain commenced. The earthy wounds of the Cispontine Quarter opened before them like a freshly-dug graveyard.

.. Eastward, where the Artists'Quarter huddles up to the skirts of the High City (and Carron Ban, it's said, deserted by her sour daughter, still waits for Norvin Trinor in the inexpressibly sad shadows beneath the heights of MinnetSaba), dawn had filled the streets with faces Hornwrack knew. The curdled horizontal light picked out a wicked jaw, an eyebrow like a punctuation mark – here a blanched cheek, there a goitre like a pregnancy or some prodigal carious baring of the teeth. Deformed and weary, furtive or gleeful, they were the faces of usurers and wastrels, of despairing cannibals and blemished martyrs, all corroded in the moral marrow and burnt to the underlying bone with the City's mark: Equipot the one-eyed merchant with his sardonic grin and rotting septum; pale Madam 'L', her haematitic eyes full of fever, hurrying to keep an appointment in the Boulevard Aussman; Paulinus Rack the undertaker's agent, his

very large head covered with broken veins, carrying a short jade cane…

They were customers of his for the most part, though none of them seemed to know him now. It was as if the events of the night had removed him from his proper sphere.

No such sleight had operated in the case of Alstath Fulthor, however much he might have wished it otherwise. From booth and gutter the eyes of the Low City stared out, to pass incuriously over Fay Glass and her outlandishly cropped hair; dwell a little longer on the old man who rode by her side (puzzled perhaps by the strange geometries on his robe, and briefly disconcerted by his tranquil yellow features and impenetrable smile); then fasten greedily on the Reborn Man like the eyes of communicants or at least the spectators at an execution.

Fulthor, that myth!

He was the enigma of the Low City, the meat and drink of their gossip. In the streets beneath Minnet-Saba all motion ceased at his comings and goings, whatever the hour. The constant bedlam of the gutters abated as he rode by, wrapped in his queer diplomatic status and his queerer armour with its strangely elongated joints at knee and elbow and its tremulous blood-red glow. Who was he? Did he serve the City, or it him? He was like some living flaw in time, through which leaked faint poisonous memories of the Afternoon – its fantastic conspiracies and motiveless sciences, all its frigid cruelties and raging glory. Since his triumphant entry at the head of the Reborn Armies eighty years ago (the Northern wolves driven before him to be caught at last between his hammer and the anvil of Tomb the Giant Dwarf), he had gone about Viriconium like the courier of a God, the very beat of his heart a response to some lost prehistoric cue. He was a miasmal past and an ambivalent future, a foreign prince in a familiar city. He was, and always had been, the repository of more fears than hopes.

So they quietened as he passed. It was like an embarrassment in them. A few smiled up at him. Some spat. Others fingered thoughtfully the metal pendant at their necks and wished, perhaps, for the night.

If Hornwrack was disposed to a certain cynical amusement at this reception of the Queen's favourite advisor, it was dispelled when their destination became plain. Fulthor led his little group first to Minnet-Saba by a northward traverse – the precipitous Rivelin Way being at this hour impassable for the stalls of a makeshift but flourishing fish market; then on to the Camine again; and by this indirect and ill-chosen route (like a main remembering quite another city) brought them finally to the Proton Circuit: a road which has only one ending, there in the great filigree metal shell of Methven's hall. Dwarfed by

the vast curve of that airy way, spiralling above the lesser thoroughfares on its hundred fragile stone pillars, they inched their way towards the palace under a sky like red lead, four small figures imprisoned in a monstrously beautiful geometry. Above them orbited a solitary fish eagle, raucous and lost here on the edge of the mountains, making long white arcs against the clouds.

Hunched up on his horse in the wind and the rain, Hornwrack perceived simultaneously his destination and his mistake. He nodded bitterly to himself. He looked up at the fish eagle to remind himself of old freedoms cruelly taken away. Then he reached deliberately over to his left where the old man rode by his side; hooked one arm round the ancient neck; and brought his second-best knife smoothly from its place of concealment beneath his wet woollen cloak. His own horse halted in confusion, but the old man's continued to move in a nervous circle. This had the effect of dislodging him from its saddle, so that his weight was completely supported by Hornwrack's stranglehold – while Hornwrack's flawed blade, flickering in the ashy light, pricked his yellow skin; and Hornwrack's flawed laugh died in his face like a poisoned dog.

'I'll go no further on this bloody road,'cried Hornwrack, 'until you tell me why, Aistath Fulthor! What have I ever had here but disappointments?'

Above him, closer now, it seemed, the fish eagle screamed. Its cries caused a kind of elation to spill through him, briefly anaesthetising the ache of his wounds and strengthening him if need be for another murder.

'I've not ridden this road for eighty years. I know you, Fulthor. Give me a reason why I should come with you now!'

But a chill went through him as he spoke; and though his words were for the Reborn Man, he found himself staring into the parchment face of his impassive hostage. The old man had spoken not once since his cryptic greeting of the dawn in Hornwrack's rooms – not once in all that long ride across the City: but now he opened his mouth and gave vent to a sudden mewing wail, a cry with no speech in it at all, which rose inhumanly into the sky and fled away'like an ancient bird. This done, he became still again, his lips dry and bluish, his rheumy eyes fixed vacantly on the empty air. The queer geometrical embroidery on his robe seemed to settle itself slowly, as if a moment before it had been in violent and independent motion.

Hornwrack clung tightly to him and shuddered, as the victim clings to his assassin. His wounds hurt him suddenly. He felt sick and he felt very old.

Alstath Fulthor, caught between one tepid nightmare and the next:

For two days a scene from his previous life had hung at the outside edge of perception, giving him the impression that he was accompanied everywhere by one or two partly visible companions. They were tall and whitish – candle-like figures resembling the drawings of the insane – and whenever he turned his head they vanished immediately. At unexpected moments the scene would submerge him completely, and he would become aware that they were walking in some sort of sunken ornamental garden planted with flowers whose names he could not remember and filled with a smell of horsehair and mint which varied in intensity with the wind from beyond the walls. Across it floated the voices of his companions, engaged in some half-serious philosophical or religious dispute. His relationship to them, whilst not precisely sexual, could be described in only the most complex and emotional of terms; and his constant attempts to see them more clearly had given his head a slight sideways tilt, and lent to his expression an even more withdrawn quality than was usual.

It was symptomatic, perhaps, of a sudden self-doubt. The old man in the embroidered robe – guarded as to his immediate origins, secretive of purpose though evidently benign – had issued from the recent history of Viriconium with all the force of a living myth. And on that high path under the brow of Hollin Low Moor, less than a week before (night coming on, the sweat drying on him, and the distant shriek of a fish eagle making alien the bleating of the autumn flocks), Alstath Fulthor had relinquished to him what he secretly saw as the stewardship of the empire. He did not quite understand how this had come about. Only that he had fought so long against the quicksand of his Afternoon memories (because after the passing of tegeus-Cromis and the vanishing of Tomb the Iron Dwarf who else was left to advise the Queen?) and now the fight was failing and he was tired to death. Only that the old man's charisma was immense, his frail old figure looming somehow over every foreseeable future, a warning or a threat.

So, even before the appearance at his house in the early hours, of the woman Fay Glass, incoherent and alone, he had begun to act in a stupor, consumed by the feeling that there was nothing to choose between the fevers of his skull and those of the world outside it. When he closed his eyes strange waxen figures moved through a garden; when he opened them again he found that he had allowed the girl (like some demented diviner) to lead him half-way across the city in search of a cheap assassin. Somewhere along the way he had collected the old man, who now watched him sardonically and offered him no assistance… 'I can connect nothing with nothing…'The tenement in the Rue Sepile filled him with disgust for the people among whom he

must now make his life. Its stairways wound like a tedious. argument, luring part of his brain along with them until he found himself thinking, apropos of nothing, *If the dead have a city it is like this one, and it smells of rats and withered geraniums* … 'But look how the leaves fall…'While his boy bled him patiently the assassin groaned and whispered from the disordered bed. Fulthor eyed the process with distaste, noting how the boy's face, delicate and womanish in the unsteady light, filled with a strange detached sympathy. Later, watching the assassin dress, he felt only impatience at the Low City swagger of him, and missed the hidden knife…

Now Hornwrack closed on his victim like a rat-trap.

There was a sudden hiss of indrawn breath. A flurry of hooves. The knife flickered out from somewhere, a blemished steel tongue in the grey light. The old man gasped once and was silent. They remained locked together for a long moment, like lovers. Above them, somewhere up in the dark morning, a huge bird shrieked. The madwoman began to ride round them in circles, whimpering and waving her arms. Hornwrack laughed madly. 'I'll go no further, Fulthor! I've been this way before. It's a road to nothing!'Suddenly he stared into the face of his hostage as if he saw his own death there. 'What?'Fear stretched his thin brutalised features.

The old man opened his throat, retched; squawked inhumanly; then seemed to smile.

'Oh! Oh! Oh!'cried Fay Glass, staring upward.

Alstath Fulthor, his brain an empty beach across which were scattered the bones of understanding, felt, rather than saw, something detach itself from the racing clouds above.

It fell slowly at first, toppling languidly off one great wing, giving vent to a high wailing cry (thus do the fish eagles of the Southern Marches plummet almost lazily a thousand yards into the cold salt water of their native sea-lochs: but this one was fully five feet from wingtip to wingtip, and of an odd grey colour); plunged quicker and quicker until Fulthor was sure it must bury itself in the paving of the Circuit; then in the final instant shot horizontally across his field of vision in a rush of displaced air, to smash into the assassin's ribcage with a noise like an axe going into an oak door. Shouting in rage and fright, Hornwrack fell backwards off his horse. He lost his hold on the old man, hit the wet road, and was bowled over in a mist of blood and feathers.

Relieved – if astonished – at this turn of events, Fulthor drew his powered blade and cursed his horse in close; found that he could get a clear stroke at neither assassin nor bird, and swept the old man up to safety instead. This gave him the illusion, at least, of participation.

In the immediate aftermath of its strike the hawk had the

advantage of momentum: with its talons fastened in his face Hornwrack went rolling and bellowing about the roadway, knife-arm flailing while he tried with the other to protect his eyes and throat. There was little to choose between them for ferocity. The bird shrieked and croaked; the man groaned and wept; rain fell on them both. Alstath Fulthor stared appalled. Eventually, blood streaming from his face and forearms, the man wriggled into a kneeling position. He grasped the bird by its neck and pulled it off him. Time after time he drove the knife into its body, but it was like stabbing a brick wall. The huge wings buffeted him. Their faces were inches apart, and both of them were screaming now as if they had finally recognised one another from some other country and were continuing a quarrel begun there long ago… Suddenly the man threw his knife away, transferred both hands to the bird's neck, and twisted it once.

They raised their bloody heads and shrieked together. The man choked. The bird was still.

Fulthor rode over, dismounted, and watched Hornwrack get unsteadily to his feet. His cloak was ripped, his shoulders a mantle of blood. He looked round him like an idiot, empty-eyed. 'Yours, I suppose,'he said to Fulthor, his voice thick and dull. He hardly seemed to notice the powered blade flickering and spitting at his throat. He held out the dead bird. 'Some bloody thing dug up out of the ground.'

The Reborn Man stared at it in silence. It was a perfect image of *a bird made all in metal:* a fantasy with armoured wings, every feather beaten from wafer-thin iridium, the fierce raptorial beak and talons forged from steel and graven with strange delicate designs. It hung from Hornwrack's hand, though, like anything newly dead – loose of limb, open-mouthed and vulnerable (as if in the moment of death it had been surprised by some truth which made nothing of beaks and claws), one great wing hanging in a slack double curve. He shook his head stupidly and turned away.

The old man seemed little the worse for his adventure, though the strain seemed to have accentuated something not quite human in the set of his features, the way his almost-saffron skin clung to cheekbone and jaw, taut as an oiled silk lampshade. 'You had better tell him why we need him, Alstath Fulthor,'he whispered hoarsely. He massaged his scraggy neck and chuckled. 'I believe he will not come except of his own accord. And I would rather he destroyed no more of my property.
'

Fulthor failed to hide his surprise. 'You made the bird?'he said.

'Long ago. There may be a few more left – 'He looked up into the grey sky – 'but they have grown shy since the War. They are less dependable, and no longer speak.'He nodded to himself, remembering something. Then: 'Tell him why we need him.'

Fulthor could think of nothing to say. He looked from the old man to the ruined bird and back 'again; then at Hornwrack (who, far from showing any further signs of fight, had begun to shiver volcanically).

'The girl,'he began. 'She was sent here with a message, we think, vital to the City, to the Empire. To all of us in these peculiar times. But look at her! The rest of her party must have wandered off somewhere between here and the Great Brown Waste: they are far along the road to the Past in her village, and it is hard for them to concentrate for long on what they judge to be nine tenths dream.'(Waxen figures were at that moment processing through his own skull, carrying something wrapped in a fantastically decorated sheet, all of them leaning at thirty degrees to the vertical; they were singing. Nine-tenths dream! He had placed her by the weave of her cloak. He could find the place but would he ever leave it again?) 'You must know what they are like out there. '

The assassin seemed preoccupied. With the hem of his cloak he was dabbing at his lips, his cheeks; the lobe had been torn off his left ear. He fought off a fresh bout of shivering (looked for a second hunted and afraid, like a man who suspects in himself a fatal disease). 'She said nothing to me. Nothing but gibberish.'He touched white bone where his jawline had been laid open, winced. 'Look at me! I am already bleeding for her. Three times now she has brought me to this, though that bastard Verdigris had his dirty hands in the matter.'He sneered. “'The face of the ewe-Iamb bone white in the mallows”! Gibberish!'

Fulthor could follow little of this. He thought privately that the man was mad.

'It is not what she has said,'he explained carefully, 'but what she brought with her, that is of significance. Had she anything with her? I thought as much! You are the only one who saw it. We must know. You owe us this, if only because you were the cause of its loss!'

This seemed to enrage the assassin.

'Then ask her, Reborn!'he shouted. He spat blood into the road at Fulthor's feet. 'It is I who am owed. I killed five of the Sign last night on her behalf and my palm is empty. One of them at least would have fetched twenty pounds of steel in the open market. Martin Fierro under my knife! That was a black madness. Here!'He stuck out his cupped right hand. 'Black bloody madness! I am sick of doing the work of the High City and reaping only their sanctimonious stares!'He turned away disgustedly and made to pick up his knife. When Fulthor's weapon pricked the small of his back, he froze. He looked back over his shoulder, a sneer spreading across his lacerated face. 'Are you frightened of a steel knife now, up there in the High City?

You could chop me like an onion with that thing if I had fifty knives like this!'He bent down quickly and snatched it up. 'Look, blunted at the tip.'It had vanished under his cloak before Fulthor could protest. He had sensed now to what extent he was needed; to what extent safe.

'She cannot tell us, Hornwrack,'said Fulthor tiredly. 'You can. That is why she brough us to you. It was her only means of communication. At least come to the palace to discuss it. I agree that you may have been treated unfairly.'

Hornwrack ignored him. He shook the carcass of the metal bird. He put it to his ear. 'It hums still. It hummed even as I strangled it.'His hands trembled, then stilled. 'I feel my death in all this.'He walked off a few paces and stared up at the palace, a mile distant and misty through the blowing rain. 'Methven's hall!'they heard him say. He seemed to be listening. 'I was once one of you,'he said. 'I was one of the rulers. I chose to become one of the ruled.'Then:

'To hell with all of you,'he said. 'I'll come because you have the weight of that behind you -'pointing to the palace -'and because you have the *baan.* But I'll tell you nothing.'He regarded Fulthor with a cold smile, drew his ragged sleeve across his red-daubed face. 'You had better watch me, Reborn Man,'he threatened. 'You had better watch me all the time.'

I would rather be a ghost than play such hollow games, thought Alstath Fulthor.

Hornwrack: The horse had run off and he refused to try and catch it on foot.

'Then walk,'the Reborn Man told him.

He writhed his bruised lips and spat. (If he shut his eyes the bird came at him still, tearing long elastic strips of flesh from his chest until the ribs showed through.)

'So,'he said. He shrugged.

Lord Galen Hornwrack, scion of a respected – if relict -House, one-time officer and pilot of the Queen's Flight, now a professional assassin of some repute in the Low City, made his way for the first time in eighty years to the palace at Viriconium. He walked. His wounds throbbed and chafed. Memories of the night gnawed him. But at his belt hung a metal bird he had ruined with his own bare hands, and he felt this to be the symbol of a continuing defiance: though he now had to admit that control of his own destiny had passed from him. Occasionally, small wheels spilled from somewhere deep within the bird to run soundlessly in diminishing circles until the wind whirled them away like chaff across the Proton Circuit. Before he went into the hall, of Methven he looked up at the sky. What had begun at least in light was now dull and unpromising. Even the deadly litharge stain of dawn had faded from the cloud-layer; so that, grey

and solid, it capped the earth like an enormous leaden bowl, a single thin crescent of silver showing at its tilted northern extremity. And as he watched even that faded.

4: In the Corridors

Tomb the Dwarf came in through the south-eastern or 'Gabelline'gate of the City, just before dawn, some two weeks after his strange meeting on the edge of the Rannoch. A fine rain was falling as he led his ponies beneath the heavy seeping curve of masonry – more tunnel than arch – where the guard dozed in a wicker cubicle and old men, woken by the rattle of wheel on cobble, squatted under their dripping felt hats and stared incuriously at him as he passed. Here, in an alcove in the wall of the arch, had once hung the notorious Gabelline Oracle, sought out and yet dreaded by all who entered or left the City: the severed head of a child hanging from a hook, beneath which had been constructed an alchemical 'body'composed of yew twigs bound together by certain waxes and fats. A lamp being lit beneath the oracle, or in more special circumstances an inscribed wooden spatula being forced under its tongue, it would give in a low but penetrating voice the fortune either of the consultant or of the City itself. No-one who had ever heard that voice could forget it; many would take the Gate of Nigg to avoid it.

Tomb heard nothing, though he cocked his head for echoes; but a breath of the past followed him a little way beyond the gate, a cold and depressing air generated in those outer regions, overflowing into the alleyways and peeling demi-monde avenues of the suburbs where geranium leaves were turning ochre and a faint smell like cat's urine issued from the mouldy brick. Viriconium, sump of time and alchemical child; sacrificer of children and comforter of ghosts – who can but shiver and forgive in the damp theatrical airs of dawn?

A red stain grew in the sky above the Haunted Gate. Against it floated the airy towers, suspended as if in water glass, while below were conjured shabby reflections – a glitter of fishscales, olive oil, broken glass, and the west wind shivering the wide shallow puddles in the empty squares. Asleep one minute and aware the next, the Pastel City woke like a whore, to commerce and betrayal, to pleasure and misery – to rare metals and offal, velvet and sackcloth, lust and holiness, litharge, lithia salts and horse cures. The red stain spread until it had filled the sky. Wormeaten floorboards groaned. Gummy eyes gazed forth, half-blind already with boredom and disgust, to watch the dawn drop dead among the sodden chestnut leaves in the Rue Montdampierre! Tomb the Dwarf, recognizing in this suburb the same slut who had emptied the pockets of an impressionable Mingulay tinker's son a hundred years before, was overcome by sentiment. He took deep delighted breaths; spoke almost kindly to his ponies; and grinned about like ajuggler.

Beneath Minnet-Saba the Rivelin market spilled across his path like the encampment of a besieging army, dotted with paling flares and the little warm enclaves of charcoal braziers. It was a good-natured, anarchical siege, noisy and stinking, full of laughter and mock acrimony. Fish stalls predominated, but among them were distributed the kerbside pitches of tattooist and juggler, prostitute and priest; together with the booths of those deft-fingered old women who are equally happy to play at the cards for whatever stakes you name, or with them tell your fortune to the accompaniment of a practised homily. The gutters were filled with fish-heads, with sneaking cats and unconscious thieves. Fishwives rubbed elbows with boys selling anemones from neck trays (while others offered filthy marzipan, or caramelized locusts like intricate jewellery from the forgotten towns of the dusty East). Over it all hung a marine reek, a pall of hot cooking fat, and reedy, disconnected music.

Into this came the dwarf's caravan like a spirit of chaos -pushing aside tottering stalls, running over unguarded feet, impervious to abuse, drawing forth as it passed each brazier the ironic catcalls of idlers and the shrieks of fishwives (who required that the dwarf come behind a booth with them and there bash the dents out of a pot they would show him). The anemone-boys rode his tall yellow wheels, grinned into his face, lost their balance and fell into the street. All the while he moved steadily up the hill toward Minnet-Saba, the crowds eddying in his wake, until he came to the upper limit of the market; and there on the precise interface of High and Low Cities, chanced on the booth of Fat Main Etteilla.

Despite the coming and going about the booth, it had attracted few onlookers. Wan torches set at its corners guttered in the growing light. Its greasy satin curtains were drawn back to reveal the Main herself, billowing over her three-legged stool and coughing like a horse in the raw air. In her vast lap sat a small drunken man with a depraved triangular face, from the top of which stuck straight up a stiff brush of almost crimson hair. His bottle-green jerkin was not only encrusted with old filth, but sticky besides with new foulness; and he seemed to be confessing his part in some brawl or murder the night before. Tears were running down his cheeks; great twitches racked his body; odd spasms of free verse left him now and then like vomit. ('I renounce the blessed face,'he intoned, 'the silent sister veiled in white and blue;'and made a sound like a choking cat. 'What else could I do? He was no friend to me!')

Before them on a flimsy baize-covered table were arranged the cards – four Urns above him; behind him the Conjuror reversed; the MANTIS crossing him: and many others. Each strange little scene glowed up from the grubby pasteboard as if viewed in a reducing

mirror – leaning columns clustered beneath a vanished constellation, extinguished suns and naked supplicants, the shadowy hierarchical figures of a symbology as old or older than Viriconium, legacy perhaps of some Afternoon parlour game. 'This,'she whispered, 'is your card, MALADIE; and here are three towers and a dog, the future as yet unrevealed, also disgrace. (Another account speaks of greed frustrated.) Look! Here's a deserted beach, and in the tide a hermit crab. Above fly three swans: APPU 1. Between the alternatives there is no marriage possible – on the one hand magnificence; on the other, disease. (Also a certain clouded joy.)'The man with the red hair, though, would look anywhere but at the cards. If his glance fell on them by accident he would pretend to see someone he knew in the crowd.

But the dwarf saw little of this, and of what he saw retained only fragmentary impressions: a white, bony face; the scattered cards like pieces of coloured glass. He heard a voice like the outfall of a sewer say, 'A locust the size of a man; a head two feet across!'

At this Fat Main Etteilla shook herself as if surfacing from a dream. She looked down at the little drunk in her lap and put one of her great fat hands over his. 'I wish I could help you, dearie,'she said with a sigh; and set him carefully on his feet. A fit of coughing overtook her as he bobbed about in front of her trying to bow. 'Piss and blood!'he screamed suddenly. 'I saw it!'He ran offinto the market and vanished.

'Wait!'cried Tomb, any talk of insects having recently become of interest to him. 'Stop! -, More to himself than to the retreating figure. The caravan was being carried forward, despite his best efforts, by the sheer weight of humanity behind it. He stood up on his seat to get a better view: nothing but a red coxcomb and a despairing cry. 'Its head twice bigger than a man's!'And then nothing at all but heads, bobbing and eddying; the market had ejected him and he was alone in the bleak formalistic spaces of the High City. The wind ruffled the puddles, and the Proton Circuit rose like a question mark into the air before him.

No-one recognized him at the palace gates. An officer made him wait while they verified a complex sequence of passwords given him twenty years ago by someone who might have been dead for ten of them. His ponies fidgeted, and furtively bit one another. Servants came and went, but none of them looked at him. 'It won't take long. Look, can you move the caravan? We really need the room.'The City's sudden indifference hurt him, although he pretended to take it with a certain stoical amusement. 'Oh well,'he told the officer. 'Oh well.'Then he jumped out of the caravan, ducked the presented arms of the gate-guard, and ran off into the palace. Old wounds had given him a

dragging, unsteady gait so that he looked from behind like some escaped ape. After a shocked silence a lot of shouting began.

A little while later he stopped to get his breath back in a corridor where the light fell as if strained through muslin. He had lost himself quite quickly in the maze of passageways which riddled the outer regions of the building like the interstices in a piece of pumice – quickly enough at any rate to evade the detachment which had tried to catch him at the front door. He grinned. He could still hear them faintly, crashing about in the empty lobbies and forgotten storerooms of quite another quarter, moving away from him all the time. But he realized now that he couldn't reach the Queen without moving into the more frequented passages and thus being sighted. An undignified homecoming. His chest hurt. He leant against the back wall of the alcove, staring at some old machine and trying to remember with half his mind whether he or someone else had dug it up and brought it back here; and when finally he decided he did indeed recognize it, he found he had forgotten which desert had given it up to him, back when he was young. Whole sections of the palace were 'his'in this respect, which only galled him further…

He was upset by his own actions and could hardly explain them to himself. An ironic game with the palace guard, conceived out of impatience and hurt pride – so it had seemed at the time: but now he felt like a man who, falling down a hole in a familiar street, discovers some artful yet not quite successful mimicry of the world he has known above. In his new subterranean existence he quarrels with familiar objects or alienates his friends – he yearns for escape but quickly finds he can no longer control events; cause and effect separate like worn-out old lovers. But it was not simply that he was out of temper with himself. The temper of the palace puzzled him, too.

Its previous calm beauty, ordered and formalistic, had

become icy; monstrous passions seemed about to crystallise in its interstices. Something had invaded the corridors where the whispering light-sculptures drifted about (their laughter so ancient and inscrutable that it no longer recalled anything human); something was abroad in the sudden nautiloid spaces, chilly and nacreous. Stumbling along in his dusty leather gear he had experienced a sudden *gauntness:* the feeling that he had allowed to go unnoticed some change which, though vast, showed itself only in the subtlest of signs: the dream of an old dwarf in a high place; a red-haired man in a market; footsteps in an empty passageway. The sounds of pursuit had for a moment mutated into a strange dry rustle, the geometry of the corridor into a mathematics, pure and bony and beyond him, and he had fancied himself the last human survivor on some craft spinning slowly through

infinite space, rigging full of frozen sailors and royal faces staring from the windows at its stern…

I am a dwarf not a philosopher. He touched the cold wall behind him. He had got his breath back. Since his arrival in the alcove the old machine had been making soft, persuasive, little noises at him, as if it needed his help to attain some self-fulfilment he could never imagine: now it abandoned him abruptly. *Oogabourundra!* it whispered. *Mourunga!* it laughed, and extended a curious yellow film of light like a wing. Tomb stuck his head out and peered down the passage. A figure appeared, strange at first, warped by the unsteady yellow gleam into a shape like a praying mantis; the dwarf waited until it had become that of a young guard – a boy still, self-conscious in lacquered black mail and pewter-coloured cloak, new boots ringing on the worn flagstones; and on the thin chain round his neck a peculiar silver medallion – then withdrew. His grinning and apparently disembodied head snapped back into the corridor wall to leave a tunnel of bland saffron light, a throat down which the boy strode unaware. Tomb let the footsteps come level with him. He waited for perhaps fifty heartbeats then slipped out.

The machine clucked disappointedly after him.

From corridor to corridor went the boy, up and down narrow flights of stairs and through abandoned halls – all the while moving towards the centre of the palace. Flickering columns of light accosted him, but he ignored them; the soft pleas of old machines he ignored. And after him came Tomb the Dwarf, hands like two bunches of bones and a grin like death – alert for the sound of voices, sidling round corners and hanging back at intersections, hoping the boy would flush up any guard that might be mounted there. The corridors were as cold as an omen, haunted by an ancient grief. Here, stairs spiralled into the upper gloom of the shell; there, faint footsteps vibrated in another passage, footsteps that might have been made in another age. As his confidence increased, Tomb began to play with the boy: scuttling up until he was only a few inches behind him, making obscene faces and gestures (and once touching the hem of his cloak) before falling back again. Success only whetted his appetite. He dodged in and out of alcoves, his head poked like a gargoyle's round each new corner. He aped the boy's stiff walk, pointing his toes extravagantly and sticking his nose in the air. He quite forgot about using him to reach the Queen unchallenged and set about tormenting him instead.

He hid behind a sculpture. He sniggered softly. When the boy looked round: nothing.

He let his feet scrape, with a horrible purpose.

He made quiet animal noises.

He was everywhere and nowhere; it was a cruel charade. The boy

knew. He hurried: stopped: listened: stared over his shoulder, his hand feverishly clutching the pommel of his brand-new sword. He said nothing, because that would have been an admission. His eyes were round, glistening in the white like a boiled egg, boiled and shelled like a fresh egg. He touched the silver insect medallion at his throat; he began to run. Tomb only let him hear another chuckle. Their merged shadows fled away beneath them as they crossed a high elegant bridge, parted at a crossroads unused for two hundred years, only to join again and vanish at the moment of joining in a silent flare of purple light vented from some ancient artifact. Tomb grew careless. Swaggering along like the tame midget of some southern prince in cockerel-coloured doublet and yellow stockings, he came abruptly face to face with his victim, who – finding himself confronted by an old mad dwarf with a knife in his gnarled hand and a series of peculiarly childish grimaces chasing themselves across his features – stared appalled.

'I – 'said Tomb. He looked down at his hand. He wondered how long he had been carrying the knife without knowing it.

The boy meanwhile trembled despairingly. His eyes were watering. He made a painful effort to draw his sword.

'Don't!'said Tomb. 'I didn't mean -, And it might have rested there had he not heard the sound of feet coming along the corridor toward them.

'I'm sorry,'he told the boy, kicking him beneath the left kneecap. The boy lay on the floor motionless, looking up at him like a hurt animal. Tomb hauled the new sword from its scabbard and tried it for balance. He had some idea of using it in the absence of his axe. 'Rubbish,'he said, and threw it clattering across the passage out of harm's way: 'Get something decent as soon as you can afford it.'He knelt on the floor close to the boy, who made no move to stop him, set the point of his knife against his throat and stared into the round hopeless eyes. 'What's this round your neck?'But the boy couldn't speak. 'Don't worry,'said Tomb, 'please.'In this manner both of them awaited the arrival of the footsteps.

Not long after, a Reborn Man came striding towards them down the corridor. He had on the fantastic blood-red plate armour of an important House, its contorted yellow ideograph flaming on the black cloak that billowed out behind him. The trembling glow of the armour made his image seem mythical, transitory, as if he flickered in and out of Time as we know it; its curious blunt shoulder-spikes and elongated joints gave him the look of some mutated crustacean. His head was bare, his expression beleaguered, and his companions were an ill-assorted lot, comprising a woman of his own race, bitterly thin, shaven-headed, her gait awkward and ungraceful, as if her skeleton

worked in a new, untested way (her smile was empty, and she was singing softly, *We are off to Vegys now, Fal di Ia di a);* a gutter bravo from the Low City, with the walk of a frustrated predator and the spoilt features of a minor aristocrat; and a dark silent figure wrapped like a corpse in an embroidered cloak.

Tomb started up with a cry. He took a pace forward, blinking and confused.

'Cromis?'he whispered.

Pain filled him and he forgot the boy on the floor. He went up close to Galen Hornwrack (for it was him, of course, morose as a wolf, petulant as an adolescent girl at finding himself so unmoved by his ancient bugbear the palace, which after all was only a place) and touched the wrecked metal bird that hung from his belt in lieu of a sword. He looked up into the assassin's face for a moment, then sighed: there was little similarity once you looked closely, and he could find there only an anguished savagery he had never found in the face of the dead poet-hero. He shook his head and turned to Alstath Fulthor.

'I'm sorry, old friend. I thought for a moment -Fulthor smiled absently down at him.

'I know,'he said. 'The similarities are superficial. What were you doing on the floor with that boy?'

He tilted his head to one side as if he were listening to something no-one else could hear, and seemed to forget what he had been saying. There was an awkward pause. Then he went on, 'You should be more patient, Dwarf. I heard there was a maniac or an ape of some kind loose in the corridors. When I saw the little caravan, I -'Fulthor shook his head as though to clear it of some double image – 'I knew it must be you. Are you going to murder this lad, or can he get back to his post?'His tone was curious, friendly but ironical: absent.

Tomb bared his rotten old teeth. He was a little disconcerted by such a reception after twenty years. 'I'm too old for patience, Reborn,'he said gruffly. 'Are you all right?'When no answer came he turned his attention almost gratefully to the boy (who had risen to his knees: colour was coming back into his face), thinking: the whole city is in a dream which it will not share with me; these corridors are cursed. 'Get up,'he told him. 'What is that thing round your neck?'When the boy wouldn't answer he asked Fulthor, but Fulthor didn't hear.

Light streamed suddenly down the corridor, the colour of murder. It rushed over them like smoke, to be sucked away into the outer maze and there dissipate: their shadows followed it. The old machine from which it had issued, so long denied its proper function, began to shriek in horror and frustration, flailing its corroded limbs as if

waking after millenia to the truth of its position. Echoes fled like bats.

Out of this abrupt madness crept a party of ten or fifteen men. A squad of the palace guard, they wore the same black and pewter uniforms as the boy, but their faces were distorted by the unsteady glare – salient features drifting into repulsive new relationships – and they came on not with a military gait but with a curious tip-toed tread, their eyes fixed on the dwarf with a feral yet somehow inorganic intensity. Had they shadowed him even as he shadowed the boy, passage to passage, all the way from the outer halls? How had he not felt those eyes like the empty lambent eyes of animals on a dark night? (Or perhaps he had.)

'Fulthor?'

But Fulthor was gazing emptily into the air again, his lips moving silently. There was no help there.

The dwarf shuddered, ambushed by circumstances. The City's web was now complete, and he found himself enmeshed. It wasn't much of a homecoming. Yet it would not be the first time he had fought his way down these corridors. He stood forward a little so as not to prolong the waiting. Nothing much was in his mind.

They were almost upon him when Fulthor whispered 'Stop.'His voice seemed to come from a long way off, and he looked almost surprised to hear it. 'Stop!'For a moment nothing changed. Tomb snarled; Fulthor touched the hilt of his sword, faced with the motiveless slaughter of his own men. But then the world shook itself and threw off the nightmare. The old machine wailed despairingly, sagged, and was silent (in its frenzy it had melted parts of its own spine and now, bent double like a crone, it twitched and contracted as the hot metal cooled). The evil light faded. The approaching men looked uncertainly at one another and put up their swords.

It was little enough, and grudgingly done: their captain nodded woodenly, staring straight ahead, while behind him they shuffled into two columns, looking embarrassed and elbowing one another sullenly. Each wore a medallion like the boy's, a curious complex twist of silver the meaning of which retreated from its seeker like a vacant perspective. 'Call off the search,'Fulthor ordered them. He spoke reluctantly, like a main hard put to control some pain or intense desire. 'A mistake has been made. This is the Iron Dwarf, who has returned to help the City in its hour of need.'They regarded him warily for a few seconds, then turned their heads away as one man and marched off. When they had gone'some distance down the corridor the boy leapt abruptly to his feet; flung the Reborn Man a glance of bitter hatred; and was off, flying down the passage after them, his sword abandoned where Tomb had thrown it. Tomb picked it up. 'What do you make of all this?'he asked Fulthor. Fulthor stared blindly

after the boy, his thin hands like a layer of white wax over bone.

'I am lost,'he said, and turned his face to the corridor wall. 'They no longer accept my leadership. Soon one of them will disobey and I shall have to kill him.'He made a noise that might have been a laugh or a sob.

Through all this, Fulthor's companions had hardly moved, but looked on with fear or irony or whatever emotion seemed appropriate. Now the Reborn Woman, sensing his distress, came forward and put one hand uncertainly on his shoulder. 'I – 'she said, and then something in a language Tomb could not follow. *'Mein Herz hat seine Liebe.* In my youth I made -'It was clear she could not help him, which distressed her in her turn. She shook him. She looked around for help. 'In my youth I made my small contribution. Blackpool and Venice become as one. Above the night the stars revolve, in circuits of the shuddering bear!'This last a shout. She wept. Oddly enough it was the assassin from the Low City who moved to comfort her. He touched her hand and his bloody, spoilt features writhed briefly: after a second's puzzlement Tomb decided this was an attempt to smile. The woman smiled back, and her face was transfigured – where the dwarf had previously seen only a chilling vacancy there now flared delight, and an intelligence like a lamp uncovered. She let go of the assassin's hand and danced away from him, singing,

> We are off to Vegys now
> Fal di la di a
> We are off to Vegys now
> Faldiladia
> On the shores of the diamond lake
> We shall watch the fishes
> On the summits of the mountains
> Cry 'Erecthalia!'
> Faldiladia
> Fal di la di a
> Di rol

Hearing this, Alstath Fulthor put his hands over his ears and groaned. 'I cannot forget the people in the beautiful gardens!'he exclaimed. He hit the side of his head with the heel of his fist. 'Arnac san Tehin! How long is it since – saw your sweet mad face at midnight, or trod with you the 'pavements of the Rue Morgue Avenue?'And still groaning he ran away down the corridor toward the outside world, stripping off his armour as he went.

A thin wind passed down the corridor, smelling of dust and hyacinth; with it came silence, a substance not an absence, to fill the

ears with empty rooms and abandoned stairs and the motionless unspeaking figures of the Earth's innocence. In this silence Tomb the Dwarf sought desperately for reassurance. But the woman had retreated into her own memories, shoulders hunched and eyes hooded secretively, a ghost of tenderness playing about the corners of her mouth; nothing she said made sense anyway. And the assassin merely smiled sardonically, shrugging as if to absolve himself of this responsibility at least (the movement appeared to hurt him somewhere in the region of his lower ribs and his expression immediately became sour and self-involved).

'Is everybody insane, then?'Tomb asked himself irritably, turning in the end – though something made him reluctant – to the man in the shroud-like cloak, who stood a little way off examining the distraught machine as ifit might help him break the universe's last mad code. The machine was crooning to him out of its incomprehensible pain, and he, standing like a mysterious parcelled statue, was whispering back; neither of them would ever understand the other. Tomb went up and stood between them, arms akimbo, staring aggressively into the unrelieved darkness of the man's hood.

'Leave that, sir,'he said, 'although I'm sure it must be very interesting, and tell me: has the City lost its senses?'

Silence.

'Very well, then: if you are a friend of Fulthor's, at least tell me when *his* illness began. I am the Iron Dwarf (of whom you may have heard), who woke him from his aeon-sleep to help defeat the North (which I did by means of knowledge gained from an old man).'

He craned his neck, but no face was visible despite that he felt eyes focused on him from somewhere under the hood. At this, his temper went. He pulled out his knife.

'Say something, you cold pudding, or I'll serve you up in slices! Are you all ignorant or loony in here?'

But the man only chuckled and said, 'You knew me last time we met, Dwarf, with your beard on fire and your broken head! Have you forgotten so soon? I would have asked you then, only there was no time: how has it been with you since our other fateful parting, there beneath the sad tower eighty years ago? What a change you and I have wrought in the world by our doings then! Do you see any of my children as you go about from desert to desert, from Waste to Waste?

And he threw back his hood, laughing his dry old enigmatic laugh, and became Cellur, the Lord of the Birds…

5: Galen Hornwrack and Metkvet Nian

Cellur the Bird Lord: he has lived for aeons in a five-sided tower full of undersea gloaming. Instruments flickered and ticked about him all that time, while his sensors licked the unquiet air, detecting new forms and seasons. Out of the cold reaches of salt marsh and estuary, out of the long cry of the wind, out of the swell of the sea and the call of the winter tern he comes to us now: out of the War of the Two Queens, with his thousand dying metal birds; out of the long forgotten dream of the Middle Period of the Earth, shaking his head over the pain and beauty, twin demiurgi of Mankind's enduring Afternoon!

What has he witnessed, that we shall never see? Forgotten, that we could hardly imagine?

The lines and figures on his marvellous robe writhe and shiver like tortured alien animals. Geometry remembers, though he may not. 'Nothing is left as it was,'they sigh, 'in that final perfect world. The towers that ruled these wastes have fallen now. The world, which they halted for a millenium in its tracks has begun to turn again. We find here no compassion as savage and sterile as theirs; no cruelty as structured or formal; no art. The vast air is stilled, where they lowed beneath five artificial planets, trumpeting verse into the frozen distance. Their libraries lie open like the pages of a book abandoned to the desert wind, their last dry whispers fade; philosophers and clowns alike, fade; that febrile clutching at the stars…'

Cellur. Ten thousand seasons once were his, years beating like hearts! These geometries could tell us. They are the spoor of Time itself, did we but know. Cellur the Bird Lord! Now he speaks -All are assembled in the throne-room but Alstath Fulthor. (Rumour has him running through the filthy alleys of the Artists'Quarter, up the hill at Alves and through the grounds of the derelict observatory, expressions of madness eroding his proud features; rumour had him leaving Viriconium for the third time in a month – no horse, no armour, only his heaving lungs, and his past in close pursuit. The Low City is entranced.)

The Queen sits with her calm hands in her lap; at her feet kneels Tomb the Dwarf, picking his teeth with the point of his knife; Fay Glass of the vanished House ofSleth, dressed in a new cloak, whispers nonsense to the Queen's Beast: while Galen Hornwrack stands apart, with a face like death. All wait, except perhaps the madwoman. Round them hover curtains of mercurial light, twists of mirror'd air. Before them five false windows tremble with views of a landscape to be found nowhere in the kingdom.

In the Time of the Locust it is given to us to see such things. 'My

Lady'(began Cellur, bowing to Methvet Nian):

'I had, as you know, some small part in the war against the North. But that war was almost my death – as I shall tell -and it destroyed both my refuge and my birds, which hurt me grievously. I have been many years coming to terms with this and my life has been a curious one since then. I return to find the kingdom much changed, and I am afraid my very coming heralds further uncertainty. It is eighty years since I sent the iridium vulture to Tegeus-Cromis in his tower at Balmacara among the rowan woods: I wish he were here today to answer a similar summons. Although I believe he thought of himself as a poet, he had a great gift for murder. Events again require such a captain. If I am to explain why, I must return for a moment to the War of the Two Queens -'That I survived the onslaught of Canna Moidart's forces

was as much a surprise to me as it is to you, who last saw me beleagured and without hope. My birds were long dead, or else scattered. The Geteit Chemosit held the causeway. Their airboat, though grounded during the early part of the exchange, mounted weapons of which I could not conceive. I was trapped in my tower, whose armoury I had never had the wit to investigate. A battle began in which the sole true flesh and blood at stake was mine, yet I looked on impotently, terrified. Stone dripped and sputtered in the face of their cannon; the estuary brine boiled and threshed with the power of mine! The watching cliffs echoed and roared with it, dust trickling down their immemorial buttresses like mortar from a rotten wall. All across the water hung a pall of glowing smoke, through which I caught briel glimpses of those dreadful automata coming and going about their vessel, their yellow eyes baleful. A curious armour seemed to protect them against my beams.

'Day gave way to a long night of blue fogs and drifting corrosive lights. The tower began to show signs of strain. It hooted mournfully into the wrack. Its summit revolved erratically, threatening non-existent enemies. Every five or six minutes its armaments blazed forth like crooked lightning, but every time a little duller. Soon its foundations began to shift. It was doomed. I knew I could not survive a night above ground, even if it should achieve some Pyrrhic victory: two hours after tegeus-Cromis had led you to safety over the estuarine cliffs, the air and water had become contaminated with some energy which poisons the fish even now, so many years on. The tower moaned, its trapped electrical voices pleading with me in strange militaristic languages, whether for advice or relief I could not tell. I could do nothing. I left it, feeling like a traitor, for the cellars beneath, reasoning that I might make my escape through the very tunnels you had used on the previous day…

'It was useless. The estuary floor had subsided. Those passages which had not collapsed were blocked with hot mud or full of boiling water. Only one would admit me, and down that I wandered for some time, the distant thud of weapons to spur me on, until I realized I had entered a part of the system unknown to me. I say little of what I found there. Much I did not understand. Much I would not even wish to remember. The sounds of conflict above grew steadily more muffled, progressively more dreamlike; until I could hear it no longer. How long it continued I do not know. Which side had the victory, I am at a loss to say. By the time I found my way back to the surface the melted stone was cold again, the tower like a snuffed candle, the Chemosit and their weapons gone. Two fish eagles patrolled the grey water; the cliffs were quiet. This was much later.

'I had known for some time of the existence of such regions beneath the tower. They had lain beneath me like a new continent, but something had kept me from exploring them. They were, I sensed, still too close to the millenial past. Echoes of the Afternoon had not yet died in them. But such echoes are not, after all, confined beneath the surface of the earth; they move above it, too: wherever one goes there is always that sense of a door closed but a moment since. And I had little choice, for only my death waited above. Therefore I went down.

'The architecture below was cold and complicated. The staircases, of which there were many, bent back on themselves, to peter out at florid, blind arches, or deliver me bemused into some hanging gallery from which I could find no exit. There was no sense of being under the earth; rather I felt that I had stumbled into some empty city or vast deserted museum. Hundreds of small cubical store-rooms led off the major passageways, each one containing an eccentric object the height of a man, wrapped against the effects of time in grey sheeting. Dust covered everything. For the most part these chambers and corridors were dark, although not silent. Instruments ticked: or clattered suddenly into life as I passed. I was afraid, which seems strange now, for it was shortly made clear to me that I had built most of these things, or at least collected them, against some contingency I have now forgotten. Eventually I reached a lighted section: at first a hundred yards of corridor strung with dim green beads; then a part of one room, full of submerged blue light from an unseen source; finally a whole suite as bright as day, haunted like a summer afternoon by an insectile hum, and full of drowsy voices!

'In these nitid quarters I was to spend many years. Here I confronted myself (although this meeting was more metaphorical than literal, and ultimately barren. I remain an enigma). Here also I learned the thing which has brought me to you today. It was here that I came

to curse the monstrous burden of immortality and the fatal snare of compassion. For I am sure now that I am immortal, though I have no idea of where or when my life began. I no longer believe myself to be human. But it is human beings who have kept me here for so long.

'I entered, then. I was tired and hungry. The place was full of moving lights which took the form of columns, diffuse spheres or dancing lampyrines. My uneasiness communicated itself to them immediately. They flickered in the cold sour air, drifting agitatedly about and whispering in secret electrical voices. Each was the outward form or 'personality'of a different machine. One might listen to the earth, another the air; while a third measured the stars themselves: they were possessed of an excitable, nervous curiosity, like thoroughbred horses. An endless ritual interweaving allowed them to exchange information or – should the situation demand it – compound their functions, so multiplying their great native percipience. One however was supreme above the rest. It was a magnificent ivory column over twenty feet tall. Out of the hubbub of voices -which by now rose like flood water or the wind at night among alders – this one addressed me. All the others ceased immediately, as though in deference.

'I was astonished, for it spoke with my own voice. It maintained its superiority over the others by virtue of being *the keeper of my memory*. The skull, you see, cannot contain the years. Memory fades or is destroyed in periodic bouts of madness and self-disgust. Before this happens the best must be consigned to some archive. Luck or perhaps an instinct brings me to that room every hundred years or so, to be relieved of the burden. In that column of ivory light reside the dry fragments of all my former selves, like a cache of earthenware shards in the foundations of an old house. I learned this with horror (and with what horror have I contemplated it since!): an emotion that was as nothing to the misery with which I confronted the incompleteness of the record itself… For more than ten millenia this machine has lodged beneath the estuary – gaps have now appeared in its own memory! Something in the machine is broken; many times too I have lost the material before it could be transferred; and there have been, it seems, deliberate deletions. A decade is missing here, there a century has slipped quietly away, leaving no clues. At the beginning of the record (if it can be said ever to have had one) only tantalising glimpses remain to imply a period half as long again as its entire span! What remains is like a tapestry holed and flimsy with age (torn too, here and there, in senile rage), through which one must stare forever at the great void. In each new incarnation I must learn afresh how to operate the machinery. That is not hard. But to understand my purpose in being here at all… I can review ten thousand years, but I

have no identity beyond that which I can scrape together in any one incarnation. I am, in short, nothing but what you see before you, an old man who has wandered into the City from the past…

'The years I have spent in that cavern burn me! The machines with their strange lights and their voices like dead leaves; the sour underground air; the Past rampant. I watched it all, on windows that formed out of the empty air at a word of command! – Saw myself from many angles – A hand extended, a new robe, speaking to a crowd, watching my first awkward creation as it hawked above the waters. I watched the Afternoon, of which I shall not speak, with its madness. I learned: but I have still not learned who or what I am, and from vague clues must build up a fleeting image, a memory which slips away even as it forms. Worse, my present memory is becoming unequal to the years. I become uncertain of my own name. Soon I shall find it hard to remember why I owe you an explanation of all this, or of myself. The void reaches out.

'Do not pity me, my lady. I have pity enough for myself.

'Months passed. I learned. The machines cared for me. They passed their secrets on to me, willingly. During the long hopeless nights I sought an image of myself in the foxed mirror of the past; but by day I learned to interrogate the natural world. I became an inexpert ear cupped to that silence which has overcome the Earth since the end of the Afternoon. Where once the air sang, now only thin electrical noises came from my instruments, like the cries of dead children. When Tomb the Dwarf disarmed the great brain in the Lesser Rust Desert, I overheard. Lights flickered in my cavern. All over the empire clusters of signals faded abruptly – the Chemosit going out like corpse candles. Later I followed his triumphant progress across the continent, Alstath Fulthor with him. From site to secret site they went, awakening the Reborn Men. For a while the aether was full of voices. Then, as the tragedy became apparent and the rebirth complexes shut themselves down one by one, silence fell again. It lasted until ten or eleven years ago when I picked up the first of the transmissions that have brought me'here.

'I could hear it only when the Moon was in the sky. It came as a hollow whisper, filling the stony sub-estuarine chambers. It was a strange, unreliable, inhuman voice, speaking a dozen made-up languages. Had it not so obviously belonged to a man I might have taken it for the monologue of some stranded alien demiurge, leaking accidentially into the void between Earth and her wan satellite. I cannot tell you how it excited me, that voice! Feverishly, I interrogated my machines. They knew nothing, they could not advise me. I answered it, on all wavelengths: nothing!

'Septemfasciata, it whispered, over and again: *Guerre! Guerre!* The

machines remember every syllable. *Dai e quita Ia rnerez… . a hundred years in the cold side of the Mloon… the veiny wing … "the heaven whose circles narrowest run" … I saw the garden that lies behind the World. There the cisterns turn against the men … nomadacris septemfasciata … colonnesfleuries (douloureux paradis!), temps plus n'adore… Oh, the filmy wing! Cold ravages me…* And then, dreadfully loud: *Sepiemfasciata! The outer planets! Mlethven!*

'For a year I suffered this monologue, with its meaningless warnings, its references to a search for "the metaphysical nature of space", to madness and death between the stars. I tired of its chuckled obscenities and cabalistic circumlocutions, its mad prophecies. I despaired of making any sense of it, and began to believe that the Moon had been infiltrated by some vast corrupt cosmic imbecile. Attemps to make contact were fruitless: there was never a break in the flow in which to admit of my existence. It ceased as suddenly as it had begun. I rushed to the machines – nothing but an empty hiss. For three days the cavern was silent and dark. The machines would not respond to me. It was as if the ending of the monologue had been a cue. I sensed that they were not so much dormant as fascinated; their attention was focused elsewhere. On the fourth day a purple mist sprang up, a pure and sourceless illumination; through this there danced excited rods and lampyrines of light, spinning, whirling, and interpenetrating in a mad quick ballet. I had never seen them so agitated. They spilled from the cavern and out into the surrounding corridors, whispering hysterically their single message.

'Something had detached itself from the Moon and was now making its way toward the Earth.

'I have never heard that demented lonely voice again. But every lunar month since then has seen a fresh launching, a new landing. I have watched them, my lady! They are like puffs of white smoke issuing from the Moon's bony grin; they are like clouds of pollen. They fall to Earth here in the Empire. I do not know exactly where. My instruments are confused, their findings incomplete and contradictory. They report interference, of a kind not encountered in ten thousand years of operation. But listen: yesterday I spoke with Alstath Fulthor the Reborn Man, in his house above the Artists'Quarter. From him I learned that some unknown force is harrassing the Reborn communities in the Great Brown Waste. We have agreed – as he would tell you if he were here – that these events must be linked. And though my instruments cannot agree on its location or its origin, they report that a city is being built somewhere in the north and west of Viriconium.

'My lady, it is not being built by men.'

Cellur's eye is like a bird's, ironical and bright; his profile

aquiline. It was different when we thought him human. His expression betrays so little now that we know he is not. Having delivered himself of his revelation he drinks some wine and looks about him to gauge or enjoy its effect.

The Queen sits with her calm hands in her lap. At her feet kneels Tomb the Dwarf, his mouth open and his knife forgotten in his hand; he is actually trying to remember something, but it will not come to him until a day or two later. Fay Glass, of the vanished House of Sleth, what is she trying to remember? It is immaterial. She sits singing to an imperturbable sculpture of steel and white light dug up long ago in the ruins of Glenluce, while Galen Hornwrack stands apart – wounds griping, expression cynical and amused. (It's clear he has forgotten the events of the Bistro Californium, and thinks the old man mad.) Round them hover curtains of mercurial light, bright primary colours flecked for a moment – like flawed but vital ores – with the reflected uncertainties of the room.

No-one knows what to say.

'Viriconium,'remarks Ansel Verdigris in his last ironic essay *Allies,* 'is a world trying to remember itself. The dumb stones perform an unending act of recall.'This pervasive awareness of the past, recent or distant, informed the personality of all its rulers, not least that of Methvet Nian. Cellur had pricked old memories back to life. Her mood, when Galen Horn-wrack was brought to her in the side chamber or *salle* she used as a library and sitting room, was already a nostalgic one. This affected her opinion of him, perhaps: although events, in the end, might be said to have borne her out.

She knew little enough about him. Alstath Fulthor, returning whey-faced and muddy from some unexplained errand only an hour before, had outlined their dependence on him as a witness to the incident in the Low City. 'The girl herself found him, by luck or instinct; she insisted that he came with us (though we'd have brought him anyway). It is hard to know why. He seems to have fought on her behalf- and thinks well of himself for it – but he will say nothing about the fate of the message she carried; and that is the important thing. His motives for refusing seem confused.'

Of Hornwrack's history he had been reluctant to say anything save, 'A disaffected lordling from the midlands near Soubridge. After the war he seems to have wiped the clay off his boots and tried to drink himself to death in the Low City.'Nevertheless, when pressed, he admitted, 'Hornwrack was the youngest son. His brothers fell with the rest of Waterbeck's ploughboys in the Great Brown Waste. His mother and sisters were murdered later, when the Chemosit invested Soubridge. At the outset of the war he was an apprentice airboatman with the prospect of his own command; but he saw no service as such.

Initially he was too young, later – with the destruction of its vessels – the whole Corps was dismantled. This he appears to regret more than the deaths of his family. After the defeat of the North he seems to have failed as a farmer, and the family estate was forfeit to the Crown when debts made it unworkable. Now he lives by his knife in the Artists'Quarter, retaining his title perhaps as an advertisement, more likely as an insult to the empire that bestowed it on his grandfather.

'At the last count he had killed more than eighty men, in High and Low Cities. A dozen are presently trying to kill him.'

I will at least understand his bitterness, she had thought.

Now she looked up from a sheet of music as he came in. His demeanour was a sham, or so it seemed to her: he affected the braced instep of the professional dancer; his long grey hair he wore gathered in a steel clasp, in imitation of those doomed airboat captains who had flown their final sorties over the Great Brown Waste at the height of the war; his cloak was the crude meal-coloured garment of the hired bravo, tailored for swagger, its hem dyed with sardonic vulgarity to the exact shade of dried blood. How could he mean anything to her, this ageing assassin with bones as raw ~ as a jeer? He filled the sitting room like a murder. His very

existence was too much for her delicate little coralline ornaments and collection of antique musical instruments; he overpowered them at once. It cannot be said that she saw through the Low City and the failed lordling, through the trappings to the man beneath: there was, after all, hardly any of him left to see.

Yet rather than simply walking through a door, he seemed to rush out at her from the past. His hair blew back in the wind of time! She saw him for a moment silhouetted against some vanished dawn – the tall thin body held with a helpless formality, the misery in the eyes, the great ruined metal bird hanging from his belt. Only a moment, but in it she mistook self-concern for dignity; wept for the dead poet tegeus-Cromis; and wondered briefly why this tired hooligan should remind her of winter hyacinths blooming in a tower by the sea.

It passed, of course.

Alstath Fulthor followed the assassin in. Beyond the threshold they regarded one another like wary 'dogs; then Hornwrack shrugged and smiled slightly, and Fulthor turned away, looking disgusted. She offered them refreshment. Fulthor refused, picked up a book bound in olive leather and stared angrily at it; while Hornwrack stood in front of her, swaying a little. He would not look at her. He smelt of death. Presently, Cellur and Tomb entered the room. Cellur took a little Mingulay wine, sighed – 'These lamps somehow recall my buried life -'and sat down in the shadows. The dwarf made her a pretentious intricate bow then leant against the wall, one leg bent to rub his calf.

'You feel your House was wronged by mine,'she began without preamble. 'We confiscated your estates. Our wars robbed you of your family.'

Hornwrack favoured her with a bitter smile.

'Houses?'he said. 'Madam, my family were farmers.'He fingered his jaw where, she saw, something had recently laid it open to the bone. 'Every airboat in the kingdom was destroyed so that you might keep your throne.'He stared over her head. 'It was my freedom you robbed me of.'

If she thought she could see the Queen's Flight burning to ashes in his eyes (drifting down into the desert like withered leaves, spilling smoke and queer lights and little silent figures), she was wrong. He had not even seen their last defeat – only stood, sixteen years old, on the phlegmatic earth and watch them fly like greyhounds into the North vessels, friends, captains all. None had ever returned, nor had he expected them to. The rest of the war he had passed in killing Northmen with a knife in the starving alleys of a.captured city; practising unknown to himself the skills of the only trade his imagination had left to him.

'Mornings,'he whispered feverishly, 'chafe me still. I wake, and look into the empty air, and wonder if throne and empire were worth it – the burning boys and crystal ships.'

He curled his lip and looked about him.

'I would not come here again for fear of finding it was not.

His hand went quickly under his cloak.

'Fulthor, do nothing!'he hissed. 'I'll kill you here, if I have to!'

He wiped the back of his hand across his lacerated cheeks. Outside in the corridor a cold draught spoke of a change in the wind; a new weather. Inside, Alstath Fulthor let his *baan* drop back into its sheath. The dwarf cocked his head like a starling. 'The old man looked on from the shadows. Hornwrack relaxed slowly.

'Madam,'he said, 'your next family quarrel will have to be fought on the ground.'

'Yet wrongs are not righted by hiding in the Low City,'Methvet Nian told him patiently.

He shrugged.

'Can you give me back the sky? If not, pay me for the service I did you last night and let me go. I believe the girl is worth something to you; and I bled for her. I do not hide in the Low City: I reject the High.'

She would not believe him. (How could sne?) Instead she offered him a myth of his own: a place among the hieratic furniture and exemplary figures of a long declining dream -In a rosewood chest with copper reinforcing bands she

kept three things: a gourd-shaped musical instrument from the East; a short coat of mail, lacquered black; anc. an unpretentious steel sword with a sweat-darkened leather grip. Now she bit her lip, and went over to the chest, and took from it the sword and mail. For a moment she stood uncertainly with them in the centre of the room, facing first the Reborn Man, who would not meet her eyes – then Tomb (the old dwarf glanced at Hornwrack and made a sudden half-amused movement of his head) and Cellur, who only stared impassively at her – and finally the assassin himself.

'Will these serve as payment?'she asked. 'They are all I have.'

Hornwrack looked surprised. He accepted the sword, hefted it; the mail coat he flexed with experienced fingers. He took a little rat's tail file from under his cloak and nicked them with it.

'They are steel,'he admitted, and shrugged. 'A fair price, though I'd have preferred it as an ingot.'He stared at her, puzzled now. 'If that is all, I'll go.'

'It is not all!'exclaimed Fulthor. 'Methvet Nian, the message!'He stood between Hornwrack and the door. The powered blade came out, evil sparks dripping from it in the gloom.

'Here's a High City trick if you like!'laughed Hornwrack, who hadn't a hope against it. He looked down at the old steel sword in his hand. 'Still-'

'Stop!'cried Methvet Nian. 'Alstath Fulthor, are you mad?'

His thin face white and sullen with confusion and rage, Fulthor let the *baan* fall to his side.

'Do not touch him. He has done us a service.'And to Hornwrack: 'My lord I see you are wounded. Visit the hospitallers before you leave here. '

Hornwrack nodded curtly. 'Don't come near the Low City after dark, Fulthor,'he said. At the door he paused, looked back. 'I would prefer to owe the House of Nian nothing,'he told the Queen. He threw the mail coat on the floor and dropped the sword carefully on top of it.

'The girl carried a bundle tied up'in cloth,'he said. 'A poet called Verdigris stole it. When he opened it he found an insect 's head the size of a melon. He couldn't sell it anywhere.'

Methvet Nian gazed at him in horror. He seemed unaware of it, leaning against the doorpost and staring into

· space. 'I don't think I've ever seen him so frightened,'he mused. He looked at her. 'It's in the gutter now, somewhere in the Low City. I left it there to rot, My Lady. Goodbye.'

Out beyond Monar the wind was shifting uncertainly, picking the first sleet of the season from the frigid summits and sea-lanes of the north. Later it would invest the city with rime, freezing airs and a

faint smell of rust: now it nosed like a cold black dog among the vast dunes and endless empty rubbish heaps of the Great Brown Waste, visiting the drab stones and foundered pylons, the half-buried wreckage of ten thousand years. What else moved up there, throwing its equivocal shadow over the Reborn communes (and mimicking the jerky, hesitant gait of the votaries of the Sign as they trod at night the streets of Viriconium, the measures of the dream)? The implications of Hornwrack's statement were colder than any wind.

'What can they have meant?'whispered Fulthor. 'To send that?'

But Tomb was intrigued by the departed assassin, and stared pensively after him. He went over and closed the.door. *'Does* he know whose sword it was?'he asked Fulthor absently. 'Did he guess?'But Fulthor only rubbed his eyes tiredly and said, 'He is a liar and a jackal.'

The dwarf sniggered. 'So am I.'He picked up the discarded sword and mail; smiled at Methvet Nian. 'That was a valiant try, my lady. A stone would have unbent to you. Shall I put these away?'

'One of you go after him and give them to him,'she replied. 'Wait. I will do it.'

When they stared at her, she laughed. 'I meant him to have them.'She would let them say no more, but finished:

'He saved the girl out of compassion, though he will never understand that.'

But for a peculiar interruption, Fulthor, at least, would have pursued the matter: indeed his mouth was already open to form a protest when Cellur – who had been slumped for some minutes in his chair, a variety of expressions, each more unreadable than the last, chasing themselves across his face – gave a queer high-pitched cry and struggled to his feet as if he had woken suddenly from some implacable nightmare. His skin was grey. His accipitrene eyes were fixed on the door, as though Hornwrack still stood there; they were bright with anguish. When Methvet Nian touched his shoulder he hardly seemed to notice her, (beneath the odd embroidery of his robe, the bones were thin and unpredictable; brittle), but muttered desperately, 'Fulthor! Tomb! No time to lose!'

'Old man, are you ill?'

'You did not hear it, Methvet Nian, the voice from the Moon, with its “great wing against the sky”. The insect's head; the landings at night; the Sign of the Locust: all are one! I must go North immediately. *All are one!'*

'Cellur, what is it?'begged the Queen.

'It is the end of the world if we are too late.'

We value our suffering. It is intrinsic, purgative, and it enables us to perceive the universe directly. Moreover, it is a private thing which

can neither be shared nor diminished by contact. This at least was Galen Hornwrack's view, who, by the very nature of his calling, had been much concerned with pain. It was a view enshrined in the airless room above the Rue Sepile, and in his relationship with the boy, whose function had been less that of a nurse, than of heirophant at his master's lustral agonies. As Hornwrack had grown used to the smell of self recrimination – which in the Rue Sepile as nowhere else is compounded of dead geraniums, dry rot, and one's own blood squeezed out of towels – he had also grown to welcome it; as he welcomed the black 'fevers of his deeper wounds, in which rediscovered a symbolic re-enactment of his crimes.

In Methvet Nian's infirmary, however, he had found none of this, but instead open casements and cheerful voices: and worst of all, that good-humoured competence by which the professional nurse – who otherwise could not bear it

demeans the pain and indignity suffered by her charge. In short: they had stitched him up but refused to let him brood. Some three days after the events in the Queen's sitting room, therefore, he had extricated himself from the place and now stalked the corridors of the palace in an uncertain temper.

His cloak had been returned to him, washed and mended. Beneath it he wore the mail of Methvet Nian, and at his side hung the unaccustomed sword. Both chafed, as did the manner in which he had come by them. He had, it is true, gone to some trouble to find for the sword a scabbard of dull moulded leather, and it looked well on him. Nevertheless, the sword is a weapon chiefly of the High City, and he felt ill-at-ease with it. He had had little training in its use. As he hurried toward the throne-room for what he hoped would be the last time, he touched the knife hidden beneath his cloak, to assure himself he was not unarmed. As for the Queen's intentions, he understood none of them. She had first tried to bribe and latterly to patronize him; he was full of resentment. It was a dangerous frame of mind in which to encounter the Queen's dwarf, who had on his face a sardonic grin.

His short legs were clad in cracked black leather, his thick trunk in a sleeveless jerkin of some woven material, green with age; his bare forearms were brown and gnarled; and his hands resembled a bunch of hawthorn roots. Indeed he looked very like a small tree, planted up against the throne-room doors, stunted and unlovely against their serpentine metallic inlays and ornamental hinges. On his head was a curious truncated conical hat, also of leather and much worn.

'Here is our bravo, with his new sword,'he said matter-offactly.

'So the dwarf says,'murmured Hornwrack, pleasantly enough. 'Let me pass. '

The dwarf sniffed. He looked along the passage, first one way and then the other. He crooked a finger, and when Hornwrack bent down to listen, whispered, 'The thing is, my lord assassin, that I understand none of this.'

And he jerked his horny thumb over his shoulder to indicate, presumably, the throne-room.

'Pardon?'

'Voices, from above. Insects. Madmen, and mad women too. One comes back from the dead (albeit he's a good friend of mine), while another runs like a greyhound at the sound of a song. Both old friends of mine. What do you think of that?'

He looked around.

'The *Qyeen,'* he said, lowering his voice, 'gives away the sword of tegeus-Cromis!'

He laughed delightedly at Hornwrack's start of surprise, revealing broken old teeth.

'Now you and I are plain men. We're fighting men, I think you'll agree. Do you agree?'

'This sword,'said Hornwrack. 'I – '

'That being so, us being ordinary fighting men, we must have an understanding, you and I. We must treat gently with one another on this daft journey north. And we must look after the mad folk; for after all, they cannot look after themselves. Eh?'

Hornwrack made as if to pass into the throne-room.

'I'll make no journey with you or anyone else, Dwarf. As for gifts, they can be easily returned. You are all madmen to me!'

He had not gone so much as a step towards the inlaid doors when a terrific blow in the small of his back pitched him forward on to his face. Tears filled his eyes. Astonished and desperate – he thought the dwarf had stabbed him – he fumbled for his knife and scrabbled into a kneeling position:

only to find his tormentor grinning ironically at him, unarmed but for those disproportionate arthritic hands. Before he could haul himself to his feet, the dwarf- whose head was now on a level with his own – had first embraced him lightly, then spat in his ear and hit him again, this time somewhere down below his ribs. His knife clattered away. His breath deserted him. Through his own heaving and choking he heard the dwarf say coldly -'I like you, Galen Hornwrack. But that is the sword of my

old friend, which was given you in good faith.'

Hornwrack shook his head and took his chance. He reached forward and clasped with both hands the nape of the dwarf's neck; then pulled him forward sharply. As their heads connected, the dwarf's nose broke like a dry stick.

'Black piss,'he said surprisedly, and sat down. They went seriously at it then, and neither could get the advantage: for though the dwarf was cunning, old and hard, the assassin was as quick as a snake; and both of them knew well the culde-sacs and wineshop floors where the anonymous chivalry of the Low City settles its quarrels amid the slime and the sawdust.

It was Cellur who discovered them there twenty minutes later. There was a yellow malice in their eyes as they staggered about in the bloody-mouthed gloom taunting one another in hoarse, clogged voices – but it was fading like a sunset, and as he watched, in the puzzled manner of someone who doesn't quite know what it is he's watching, he heard this final exchange:

'I beg My Lord the sheep's arse to change his mind.'

'My brain is as addled as a harlot's egg. Get me out of this place, Dwarf. It stinks of kindness. North if you like. What do I care?'

6: The Sudden Embodiment of Benedict Paucemanly

Cellur could not (or would not) articulate his fears more clearly. He questioned Fay Glass it is true: but nothing was revealed, her contribution being only a babble of archaisms and ancient songs; bits and pieces – or so Alstath Fulthor maintained – plucked from the racial memory as she pursued her lonely temporal descent. 'She understands us: but speaks from a vast distance, no longer sure what language to use, or what to say.'Despite this, Cellur argued, it was clear that she knew the secret of the insect's head -why else should she show such distress at her own failure to communicate? Since she could not tell them what had happened there, it was, he repeated, essential to follow her back to the North.

'She is in herself the message: and a call for help.'

When Fulthor protested that, as seneschal, he could not abandon the Queen while the Sign of the Locust grew so in power, harassing daily the Reborn of the City and infiltrating its prime functions, Cellur only said: 'I shall need you. Your people in the Great Brown Waste will not treat with me. They are too far gone on this “road to the Past” you describe. When we have discerned the meaning of the insect's head, that will be the time; when we have understood the warning from the Moon, and discovered the landing sites in the North: then we shall know what to do about the Sign of the Locust.'

And Fulthor could only stare out into Viriconium, where at night in a lunar chiaroscuro of gamboge and blue, the long processions wound silently from one street to another, to the accompaniment of a small aimless wind.

The weather deteriorated as he watched, a raw air piling up against the massif of the High City and filling the Low with damp. Beneath a thick grey sky the watery plazas took on a wan and occult look; while in the pensions of the Rue Sepile the old women coughed all day over their affairs, and the atmosphere became adhesive with the smell of cabbage. The walls seeped. It was, all agreed, no time to be living in the Artists'Quarter; and, perhaps as an addendum to this theory, gossip remarked the sudden disappearance of Galen Hornwrack. Had he indeed quarrelled with Ansel Verdigris his erstwhile crony (some said over a coin, though others maintained it was a woman from the North, or even the wording of a verse in a ballade of smoked fish)? Up and down the hill from Minnet-Saba, huddling closer to brazier and guttering cresset, his enemies and rivals scratched their heads – or else, distempered, fought among

themselves.

The object of this attention, meanwhile, languished in the draughty corridors of Methven's hall, where he examined his wounds from hour to hour and honed morosely his knife, gripped by the phthisis and melancholy of early winter. He had little contact with his new companions. He avoided Fuithor and thus, of neccessity, the discussions in the throne-room. Once or twice he heard the madwoman singing in some chamber. Of Tomb, who had in such a peculiar manner befriended him (at least he supposed it was that), he had no news. Methvet Nian having at last agreed to an expedition, therefore provision must be made of food, horses, weapons, and such safe-conducts as were necessary. The dwarf had concerned himself with this, and with preparations of his own, and was not much about the palace.

Hornwrack shrugged; paced the corridors at night, gazing in a sort of savage abstraction at the old machines and whispering sculptures; and refused to answer his door. On the day of their departure he had to be fetched from his apartment (he was staring into a mirror). On the day of their departure, sleet fell, quickly soaking the striped awnings in the street markets and filling the gutters with a miserable slush. On the day of their departure a vision was vouchsafed to them; Tomb the Dwarf remembered a legend at whose birth he had presided long ago; and their ill-fated expedition acquired its tutelary or presiding spirit -

*

This apparition, which was to remain with them until the peculiar termination of their journey, manifested itself first in the throne-room at Viriconium. Besides Cellur the birdmaker, only Hornwrack was present. (Methvet Nian was to watch their departure from the City by the Gate of Nigg, and had gone there early. Alstath Fulthor fretted in an outer yard with Fay Glass and the horses. Tomb the Dwarf, having worked all night in his caravan – white heat flickering out over the tailboard to the accompaniment of a sad hammer – was dozing in some corner.) It was not yet light: the palace was chilly, echoic, nautiloid. Cellur, hoping to contact his own machines in their redoubt beneath the Lendalfoot estuary, passed a yellow hand through his beard. 'Brown, green, counting,'he whispered, and in response a flock of grey images twittered like bats across the five false windows of the throne room. Clearly this was not the result he had forecast. 'Do you

see nothing?'he said impatiently. 'I must have fresh news!'

'Be quick old man,'said Hornwrack neutrally. He yawned and rubbed his face, feeling an obscure tension in the muscles of his neck. This he put down to being woken early. Like Fulthor, for reasons more or less complex, he was anxious to be off. Alone with wound, knife and mirror over the last twenty-four hours, he had been surprised to find that he no longer regretted his psychic severance from the Low City. He thought now only rarely of the boy in the Rue Sepile, the bitter smell of dead geraniums: instead looked forward with a dry eagerness, curious as to the fate of his obsessions now that their confining frame had been removed. He massaged his neck. The old man muttered fractiously. In the upper air of the throne room the light was becoming stratified, bands of very · pale pink and yellow leaking through the high eastern skylights. Dawn had arrived early. Fresh news! 'Be quick!'

*'Abrogate all rituals,'*said a soft confidential voice from somewhere above him. He looked up, startled. It sniggered. *'What a lovely piece of meat!'*

Up near the vaulted ceiling a salmon-coloured layer of light had begun curdling into grey muculent lumps and strings which floated about like bits of fat in a lukewarm soup, bumping one another gently. After a minute or two of slow tidal effort, these in their turn merged to form a thick, lobed nucleus: from which presently evolved the crude figure of a man. Hornwrack studied this process with disgust; noting how, as they strained to become arms and legs, the lobes heaved and struggled like something trapped in an elastic bag. He caught the birdmaker staring puzzledly upwards and sniffed sarcastically.

'Have you finished tampering, old man?'

Cellur made an impatient movement with one hand.

'Hush!'

The man hanging in the air above them (if it was a man) wore clothes of some rough faded material, originally black,tailored in a fashion which had not been common in the City for over a century. Where it could be seen, his skin was pallid, greenish, covered in withered silvery patches. Over his face was clamped a kind of mask or breathing apparatus from the black snout of which sprouted many truncated tubes and proboscides; this was attached by four black straps which, cutting into the swollen flesh of his cheeks, met in the straggling yellow hair at the back of his head. He was enormously fat, as if he had passed much of his life in a sphere where human conditions of growth no longer pertained: his hypertrophied buttocks floated over their heads like shadowy moons, accompanied by a thin monologue, cabalistic and futile, of which no sense might be made

whatever -'Here I sit, an old man in the *Neant* of the wind *(Prima convien che tanto il ciel),* stranded for so long in the fractured white spaces, a hundred years of pearly silence in the garden behind the world: there I lay in the biting wind -ABRACADABRA – there ate in the shadow of the veinous wing manna *(perch'io indugiai alfine i buon sospiri);* and what for? WAR! Now they burrow in the great borrowec abracadabra of my surviving soul. Ah! Fear death from the air! What a lovely piece of meat, my dear!'

– And so on, punctuated by roars of pain or rage as rolling slowly from one corner of the room to another, he attempted to right his huge floundering bulk or adjust its height from the floor. At times he seemed quite solid, while at others an appalling smell filled the throne-room and his outlines became vague and mucous again. In moments of solidity he would struggle and thresh; he waved his arms, perhaps for attention, perhaps to keep his balance in whatever grotesque medium he was floating. (It was plain that the air of Earth could not support so gross a body – he wallowed rather in some mysterious waterglass, some dimension of his own.) When he faded, his voice faded too, becoming feeble and distant and distorted, as if by passage through some inhospitable aether.

Cellur the birdmaker was transfixed. 'This is none of my doing!'he cried, full of an ancient excitement. 'Hornwrack, it is the voice from the Moon!'

('It's a voice from a sewer,'declared Hornwrack, and, *sotto voce:* 'A voice from a pantomime.')

Cellur addressed the floating man. 'Many nights I listened to you. What have you to tell me? Speak!'

'Blork,'said the floating man.

Thereafter he disregarded Cellur, but courted Hornwrack vigorously, his eyes ingenuous and fishy behind the tinted faceplate of his mask. Sidling up to the assassin he would wink coyly and embark on some earnest incoherent suit; only to topple helplessly over on his side before he could complete it, like the corpse of some small decomposing whale. 'Listen to me, my lad (black buggery!) I can see you're a flier. Listen, the regenerated word burrows within me! We must have a talk, you and I – 'Then, making a terrified pushing motion: 'No more, no more of that!'And off he would go, bobbing about the throne-room at the height of Hornwrack's head, a sour fluid dribbling from the edges of his mask.

This was too much for Hornwrack, who, eyeing the apparition superstitiously, got out the sword of tegeusCromis and followed it about, making lethal cuts at the air. 'Back to your sewer!'he shouted. 'Back to your madhouse!'while Cellur in an attempt to restrain him plucked feebly at his cloak and 'the apparition evaded them both,

chuckling and sneezing.

Nothing could be got from it. If they left it alone, it harangued them mercilessly, in fragments of infernal languages. When they pursued it, Cellur in a spirit of conciliation, Hornwrack with murderous blows, it merely hiccupped behind its mask and blundered off. For half-an-hour this pantomime continued, until, in the face of the growing daylight, its periods of stability became fewer, it. outline grey and debatable. Its voice faded into an enormous echoing distance in which might be heard quite distinctly the sound of waves on some unimaginable shore. Eventually it vanished into the same odd brew of light as had engendered it, and they were left stranded in the empty throne-room, furious and futile.

This was how Alstath Fulthor found them: staring breathlessly into the vacant air. Had he listened carefully, as they begged him, he might have heard a feeble buzzing voice exhorting him to 'Fear death from the air!'The sound of waves, or something like it. Silence. But what were voices 'to him, who now heard them constantly in his head?

'It is long past dawn,'he said irritably, 'and the Queen will be waiting for us.'

· In the event they saw very little of her, for it was a brutally cold day: only a white face in a window near the top of a tower; a white hand raised; and then nothing. Alstath Fulthor, his great black horse and blood-red armour glowing heraldically beneath the overcast, drew an ironic cheer from the handful of Low City dwellers who stood in the slush to watch them through the Gate of Nigg. Viriconium, foundered across the stream of time behind them, like some immense royal barge abandoned to winter! This zone of monstrous narcissism and gigantic depressions behind him, Hornwrack sensed the beginnings of the new phase signalled by the manifestation in the throne-room. We are all mad now, he thought. On an impulse he unsheathed the old steel sword and held it high. But when he looked back Methvet Nian had already left the tower.

Outside on the low brown foothills of Monar lay the first snow of the season, drifted up against the stone intake walls and sheep enclosures. The pack animals were fractious, the wind bitter. They travelled slowly; but the dwarf, who had been sleeping in some straw, did not catch up with them until much later.

When he did, he said, 'This “bloated ghost” you speak of: he was the finest airboatman of them all.'

And that night, huddled by a dying fire in the hills above the distant City, he continued: 'At Mingulay he flew one machine against eight. Cooking rats in the sun at noon we watched, my long-dead friends and I, from the beleagured city. His boat was old, his crew

haggard; the drugs he took to stay awake had made him shake and stagger: but how that boat spun and turned, how it dropped like a hawk amid the violet bolts of the power cannon! How the brassy light of the South glanced off its crystal hull! Benedict Paucemanly: seven wrecks dotted the arid plain before the siege was lifted; the eighth he rammed afterwards, in an oversight.

'But war was never enough for Paucemanly. When the world was still young (and the Methven still casting their shadows across it) he flew round it. I know, for I was with him, a dwarf of few summers who fancied himself an adventurer. We crossed the oceans, Hornwrack, and all the broken continents! Deserts drifted beneath our hull, rapt in their millenial declining dream. At the poles, aurorae cascaded and roared above us like spectral rivers. We sampled the tropics; the equatorial air burned about us. That was Paucemanly's first flight in the *Heavy Star.* But if war failed to satisfy him, so did the world. He grew bored. He grew melancholy and thin.

'He began to stare each night at the wan and sovereign Moon.

'Oh, he yearned after that sad planet. His plan was to go there. “The mysterious navigators of the Afternoon,” he reasoned, “had commerce with it daily, in just such boats as these. The space outside the Earth was of no consequence to them. Perhaps,” he persuaded himself, “the boats remember the way.” We watched him leave on a black night, in that famous ship. She rose into the darkness, hunting like a compass needle. Old senses revived in her. She trembled in anticipation, and strange new lights glimmered at her stern.

'We never saw her again, any of us. The *Heavy Star,* the *Heavy Star!* That was a hundred years ago -The old dwarf's eyes were red and flat in the gloom,

reflecting the firelight like the eyes of an animal. 'Hornwrack,'he whispered, 'she knew her way. Don't you

see? This “bloated ghost” you describe is Benedict Paucemanly returned to us. He has been a hundred years in the Moon!'

Hornwrack stirred the embers with his boot. 'That is all very well,'he said a little cruelly (for he envied

the dwarf these memories, with which he had nothing to compare): 'But what has he brought with him past the gates of Earth? And why is he a gibbering idiot?'

The dwarf looked at him thoughtfully.

Later, Cellur the Bird Lord was to describe their journey north in these terms:

'Among the stone crowns and aimless salients of the empty foothills we received hints of some state of being we could not imagine. The world was bleached of its old meanings even for those of us who had previously accepted them. (I do not count myself among

these. How could I?) This happened immediately we left the City. It was as if a protection had been removed from us. Mosaic eyes seemed to observe us from behind the dry-stone walls. In the outline of a ridge or a wayfarer's tree might be contained the suggestion of quite another object – a folded wing, for instance, or the coiled tongue of a moth.

'Alstath Fulthor led the way. Some internal process held him rapt. He had begun, perhaps, to map the paths inside himself which led to the Past. This gave him an absentminded air, and an irritable one, as if by our presence we interrupted some private conversation – although had anyone suggested this he would have rejected it angrily. Attempting to live simultaneously in two worlds, he rode moodily ahead and seemed to see nothing – head bowed into the rain, blood red armour pulsing like a beacon. If it was madness then it was only the madness that has infected all his people since their Rebirth. They will learfi in the end that the journey they long for is impossible; and accept the world as it is.

'The unmarked journeys of the soul: as we descended the foothills, we came upon old roads lined with sagging yews and blunt formless stone beasts. Here there is little left to humanize the debased earth; this is the beginning of the end, where the Empire wastes away with its own geography. On the narrow strip between the mountains and the coastal flats only the giant hemlock grows now; and among it the ruins of the Afternoon are rotting, cities made of bloody glass submerged beneath cold and muddy lagoons: the ancient Fen Cities, among whose broken towers now creep the black wherries of the Evening, tacking and creaking from staithe to staithe in pursuit of a bleak diminishing trade. Of the old roads none are whole. The wide fused highways of the Afternoon peter out into shattered flags or limestone cobbles laid in Borring's day; eventually into sheep-trod, nettle and smallholding.

'The best of them, though, skirting warily both salt marsh and massif, makes its way to Duirinish, that grey outpost of former kings which is gateway to the Great Brown Waste and to the old cities of the North; and along this we took ourselves, under the patronage of the hallucinatory pilot Benedict Paucemanly. Exorting, demanding, mumbling eternally in its strange self-constructed language, vanishing at intervals only to return refreshed, his ghost (if indeed it was his) had haunted us for a hundred miles or more. Now it wallowed above us like a waterlogged tree; now hid like a girl among the fleshy etiolated hemlock stems; now muttered, “On the Moon it was like white gardens. *Pork.*” It would not answer Alstath Fulthor, which put him out of temper; nor would it speak to me: Tomb the Dwarf it actively avoided, as though embarrassed by his persistence, sidling

away down the hemlock glades grinning and breaking wind apologetically. And if he spoke to it of the “old days” it regarded him with wide panicky eyes and flapped deprecatingly its awkward great hands.

'Galen Hornwrack, however, it courted ardently, trying to capture his attention with a wink or a whistle. “Land ho, lad!” it would cry; and, bobbing in the air before him, make an elaborate mime of discovering some *terra incognita:* shading its eyes with one hand while with the other it pointed north and west. (Fulthor made light of this mummery, arguing that the thing was mad if it could be said to exist at all: yet after a few repetitions one felt a profound sense of urgency, as if some fading fragment of the original airboatman was struggling to act out or insinuate something he could no longer articulate.) Hornwrack's response was characteristic. He hated to appear a fool. The more the thing wooed him the more he averted his gaze. And at night when he thought himself unobserved he stalked it patiently through the firelight, the partly healed scars on his cheeks burning like the ritual stigmata of some primitive hunter. Each failure to kill or confine it increased his anger: when the girl Fay Glass sang “We are off to Vegys now,” and smiled at him – which was some days her only human contact – he would not smile back, which made her fractious and difficult to manage in her turn.

'In this way we came to Duirinish, which we avoided to the west, having no business there. It is a great place, that, the bulk of it being built facing north. We passed it in a pale dawn, the sun striking grave and oblique on the dwarf oaks of Low Leedale. A bitter metallic smell hung in the air, making the horses delicate of temper; the grey stones of the city had a brooding look. Small dour figures could be seen staring down from among its parapets and machiculations, but they had no time for us. For five hundred years the men of Duirinish had kept the border: what they now saw from their fastness as they stared into the North, what strange alterations and diffusions of reality, I do not care to think. On our part we found the world a changeable place.

'Shrewd sea winds courted us. On our right marched a line of tall cliffs. Originally deposited as a limestone reeffront some hundreds of miles long, these had been worked during Earth's long Afternoon into a chain of quarries broken here and there by little steep-sided valleys with crumbling mossy headwalls. In and out of the hidden caves and sinkholes of this region (in effect the lip of a vast plateau, stretching a mile or so back inland before being buried under the culm measures and doomed black soils of the Great Brown Waste) there flowed whitish polluted streams. The trees were grey and dry. Now we moved deeper into it, and into a kind of psychic dislocation, picking a way through the gummy, lifeless, tidal pools while mirages came and went

over our bowed heads.

'We had no idea of what might disclose itself from day to day. At evening we left the beach and lit fires in the tottering mazes where interleaving bituminous strata had made the rock rotten and easily-eroded. But the flames were hard to kindle. They were pale and cool. Later, the echo of falling rocks clattered through the dark like the sound of skittles falling in a deserted alley. From the upper ledges there drifted down an endless rain of tiny luminous beetles. All night long the wind shook the skeins of dead ivy; and in the morning, as the sea-fogs cleared, vast insects would appear in the distance, their reflections perfect in the wet sand of the tidal flats; they moved ponderously away before we could identify them. All this, as I have said, was contained at first in the outlines of ordinary things, much as a shadowy architecture of colonnades and alien galleries can be made out in the walls of an empty quarry: but as we moved north the landscape itself became thin and grey, textured like mucus, with the bones of some other landscape showing more or less clearly through:

"'The World is coming to bits," said Galen Hornwrack; and someone answered dryly. "The world is being exchanged for something else."

'It comes to me that each of us suffered during this northern transit an emptying or bleaching of the identity in preparation for a future we could not describe. Viriconium was behind us. (Even those of us who returned there never saw it again; but found a changed City, one in which we were not comfortable.) In the sense that it no longer filled our day-to-day thoughts, we had forgotten our purpose. We existed simply to slip through the rain, a handful of salt-lipped figures beneath the unending cliffs, speaking in low sepulchral voices. Before went like a banner, the raging glory of the Afternoon, with its great horse and scarlet armour; while a sniggering dwarf in a leather hat brought up the rear on a pony no bigger than a dog: and above us floated the baloonlike form of the ancient airman, chivvied like a dying whale by gangs of raucous gulls. Cyphers, we pass beneath the hungry ironic eyes of the gannets and guillemots – the assassin resentful and disfigured; the woman who believes herself lost in time; and myself- a thing, alive beyond its rightful years, far beyond its rightful place! The landscape, though, anticipates our release: this preparation or interlude is drawing to a close…

"'We should turn east soon if we are to find your village," Fulthor insisted patiently. Fay Glass frowned at him like a child, her hair plastered to her skull. She wore two or three purple flowers which she had previously offered to Hornwrack, and due to his refusal of them was agreeing with no-one. "Nobody who truly cared about hygiene could read the message above," she declared with a mutinous dignity.

“How can we prevent abuse in the first place?” Fulthor could only shrug. Shortly after this exchange it became evident that we had lost the Glenluce road: the beach became narrow and steeply shelving, the cliffs undercut, and our progress dependent on the state of the tide, from which we were forced to take refuge twice a day. Eventually we led our horses up the first tottering rake which offered a way to the top of the cliffs.

'That was evening or late afternoon. The light was fading. Squalls of rain blew out of the advancing sea-fog, dotted with large wet flakes of snow. A melancholy heath dipped away inland – shadowy, sheep-cropped turf, black gorse and bent hawthorn trees. Northwards and at right-angles to the coast, defile succeeded narrow defile, each one cutting through the limestone to the underlying metamorphic shales and broadening as it reached the sea. The landscape was scattered with old metal bridges. It had a discarded air. We passed the night huddled at the foot of a ruined stone wall, unaware that a mile or so ahead lay the port of Iron Chine, nexus of a strange war, with its weird banners and demented prince. Rusty iron creaked in the wind.'

Cellur does not relate how on the next morning they found that Paucemanly's ghost had abandoned them, or how they slumped on their soaked and surly animals staring dully at the desolation which stretched away inland: that half-fertile strip of dissected peat and tough ling-heather pocked with lethal seepage hollows which was the merest periphery of the Great Waste. Unpredictable soughs full of brown water threaded its endless slopes of sodden tussocky grass; and queer rocks were embedded along its rheumy skylines, eroded by the wind into vague and organic silhouettes. This was their ultimate destination (it is, in another way the ultimate destination of everything, as the Earth enters its long Evening), or so they imagined: but in the face of its winter they faltered. Instead of turning eastward Alstath Fulthor led them first along the cliffs and then down into Iron Chine. They followed him like a handful of refugees from some chronological disaster, heads bowed against the bitter blow of Time.

The cyclopean quays of Iron Chine are older than the Afternoon. No-one knows who built them, or for what crude purpose. The massive untrimmed blocks which comprise them are not native to this coast but cut from granites formed much further north. Who brought them down from there to bind them with iron and pile them in the cold sea, or when, is not known. They are black, and wet with fog, like the vertical walls of the fjord which contains them, the archaean unvegetated slates of which sweep down to an ebon sea. The enormous quayside buildings are also black; their purpose is quite lost and most of them have fallen into decay. The modern port subsists on fish, gulls'eggs, and mutton. Cowed by geography, time and the sea,

its limewashed cottages huddle uneasily amid a greater architecture; above them a road has been pushed through the rotting slates, and winds its way perilously up to the clifftop pastures.

Down this Galen Hornwrack now rode (the dwarf beside him croaking tunelessly), puzzled by the mist that lay in the trough of the fjord. It was ashen and particulate. Inner currents stirred it sluggishly. A gust of wind, exploding over the lip of the cliffs and roiling down past him, parted it for a moment, but revealed only black water patterned by the rain. Yet he sensed it was occupied (although he could hardly have said by what): he stopped his horse, stood up in his stirrups, and craned his neck anxiously until the rift had closed again. 'What's this then?'he asked himself. He shook his head. 'Fulthor,'he called back, 'this may be unwise. Further down, where the air was calmer, he smelt smoke, urgent and powdery at the back of his nose. Now the dwarf became agitated too, wiping his nose with the back of his hand, squinting and sniffing about him like a nervous dog. Behind the smell of smoke was something sharper, less easy to identify.

Lower still, at the edge of the mist, halted before it like a swimmer at the margin of an unknown lake, he became convinced that people were moving about down there on the water in a panicky and disorientated fashion; and distant shouts came up to him, partly muffled by the mist but discernibly cries for aid. 'It may be unsafe, Fulthor,'But Fulthor motioned him on, and from then on events seemed to reach him at one remove, as if he was not quite part of them. It was a familiar feeling, and one that recalled the Bistro Californium, the deadly gamboge shadows of the Low City- Inside the mist was a distinct smell of lemons, and of

rotting pears – a moist and chemical odour which sought out and attacked the sensitive membranes of the body. The light was sourceless, and had the effect of sharpening outlines while blurring the detail contained within them: on Hornwrack's right, the dwarf looked as if he had been cut from grey paper a moment before – a tall queer hat, a goblin's profile, an axehead bigger than his own. Beyond this paper silhouette the path fell away into a whitish void in which Hornwrack made out now and then a localized and fitful carmine glow. While he was trying to remember what this reminded him of, Alstath Fulthor took station on his left. Their throats raw, their eyes streaming and their noses running, they advanced in a cautious formation until the path began to level out and they found themselves without warning on a wide stone concourse bordering the estuary.

Here the mist was infused with a thin yellow light. But for the slap of the waves on the waterstair below, but for the silence and the smell of the fog, they might have been in the Low City on any cold October night. Hornwrack led them to the water's edge, the hooves of

the horses clacking and scraping nervously across an acre of worn stone slabs glistening with shallow puddles. A languor of curiosity came over them. Despite their forebodings they tilted their heads tQ hear the distant thud of wood on wood, the faint cries of men echoing off the estuary. Even Fay Glass was quite silent.

Hornwrack narrowed his eyes. 'Fulthor, there are no longer fishermen in this place.'Distances were impossible of judgement. He wiped his eyes; coughed. 'Something is on fire out there.'

The smell of smoke had thickened perceptibly, perhaps carried to them by some inshore wind. With it came a creaking of ropes and a. smell of the deep sea; groans and shouts startlingly close. Now a node of carmine light appeared, expanding rapidly. A cold movement of the air set the mist bellying like a curtain. Hornwrack shook his head desperately, looking about him in panic: abruptly he sensed an enormous object moving very close to him. The mist had all along distorted his perspectives -

'Back!'he shouted. 'Fuithor, get them back from the water!'Even as he spoke the mist writhed and broke apart. Out of it thrust the foreparts and figurehead of a great burning ship.

Its decks were deep with blood. Once it had been white. Now it rushed to destruction on the waterstair, spouting cinders. Its strange slatted metal sails, decorated with unfamiliar symbols, were melting as they fell. Captained by despair, it emerged from the mist like a vessel from hell, its figurehead an insect-headed woman who had pierced her own belly with a sword (her mouth, if it could be called a mouth, gaped in pain or ecstasy). 'Back!'cried Galen Hornwrack, tugging at his horse's head: 'Back!'

Fay Glass, though, only stared and sneezed like an animal, transfixed by the mad carven head gaping above her. Dying men tumbled over the sides of the ship, groaning. 'Back!'as the jean, charred hull drove blindly at the shore; 'Back!'as it smashed into the waterstair and with its bow torn open immediately began to sink.

Down it went, with a roar and a shudder. The deep cold water gurgled into its ravaged hull. Ratlines and halyards fell in blazing festoons about its cracked bowsprit. Horn-wrack pulled the madwoman off her horse and dragged her away. She wiped her nose. Sparks flew about their heads. The hulk lurched, settled a little lower in the water. A sail fell, showing Hornwrack for a moment a curious symbol – a hexagon with eccentric sides, through which crawled orange-throated lizards – before it hissed molten into the sea. High up in the doomed forecastle a solitary figure stood – mantled in blood. 'Murder!'it sobbed, staring wildly down at Hornwrack. 'They've followed us into the estuary!'It hacked with a blunt shortsword at a flaming spar. 'Oh, this damned mist!'Suddenly it was catapulted from

its perch and with a thin wail fell into the water.

'Hornwrack!'

The burning ship reminded him of some childhood ritual, some solstitial bonfire lit in the wet dark ploughland. He turned almost reluctantly from it, his face stiff with heat. Fulthor, Tomb and the old man stood a little way off; toward them across the gleaming concourse men were running. 'To you, Fulthor!'he cried, just as he might have done beneath the heights of Minnet-Saba, where the rival factions of the Low City clash without chivalry at night; and, encumbered by the madwoman, promptly dropped the unfamiliar sword. 'Black filth, girl. Let go.'The weapon tolled like a bell on the worn flagstones. His horse trod on it. A fit of coughing racked him.

As he disentangled himself, though, he realised that the mist was dwindling round him like a dream, to reveal the giant quays and boatsheds; the little town; the slatey cliffs.

Seabirds called as they skimmed the water. Even the clouds were blowing away. For all the fears of the dead sailor, nothing floated out there on the roadstead. But for the bubbling wreck on the waterstair the estuary was empty of menace, quite empty. Puzzled, he drew his knife and urged forward his horse.

7: Saint Elmo Bujfin and the Navigators of Iron Chine

With the mist dispersed the village smelt of smoked fish and salt. Fulthor and his party stood outnumbered and uncertain at the centre of an unarmed crowd. Hornwrack had put up his knife. Like the survivors of some forgotten colonial war (desultory, expedient, never quite resolved) the occupants of Iron Chine drew round him: thin intelligent women, a few bare-limbed children. There were no young men present, only some old ones who stamped their feet and turned up their heavy collars, faded blue eyes watering in the cold wind. They stared up at him with a defiant incuriosity and he stared back embarrassed, although he could not have said precisely why. It was a mixed community; at the periphery of the crowd a handful of the Reborn hovered like strange, long-necked animals, their delicate features coarsened a little by an unrelenting deprivation. What had they left behind them in the Afternoon, what mad sophistications exchanged for the smell of dead fish?

A few sailors who had escaped the wreck now swam ashore.

No-one offered them any help; nor did they seem to expect it, but pulled themselves up on to the quay and sprawled there with the blind, open-mouthed look of the exhausted. After a moment two of them got up again and between them pulled out a third. He kept trying to thank them. They knelt by his atrociously burnt head until a trickle of clear fluid ran out of the corner of his mouth; then they left him to stare sightlessly at a flock of gulls tearing pieces off something out on the estuary. They were yellow-haired, guileless, hardly more than children, but their faces were full of despair, as if they had fought a lifetime of holding actions and unplanned retreats. Alstath Fulthor observed them gravely for a minute or two then, finding no other authority and extricating himself with difficulty from the civilian crowd, presented them with his safe conducts.

'Our mission is one of importance,'he told them.

Eventually one of them said, 'This was not the time to come here.'He turned his back and, quietly dismissing the intrusion, vomited up a quantity of seawater. His companion put a placatory hand on his shoulder and reminded him,

'Captain, they come from the capital -'

But he only wiped his mouth and laughed wildly. 'Ay, and look at them! Some yellow old man, and a *woman.* Two city lordlings and their dwarf!'

A fit of dry retching shook him. 'There will never be any help

from Viriconium,'he said indistinctly. There was self-pity in his voice, and after a moment or two he acknowledged it with a disgusted twist of his mouth. 'Did you see anything out there?'he asked; and when the other shook his head, whispered, 'I pity those that did.'

He tried to squeeze the salt water from his hair.

'One of our own vessels rammed us, that's certain,'he continued thoughtfully. 'But by then we were already burning.'

He shrugged.

'It was as usual. Those who saw anything were struck mad immediately. Those who did not got lost in the mist.'

Thus the defeated, locked in their dreams of defeat.

'You are bound to help us!'shouted Alstath Fulthor suddenly.

'Leave them alone, Fulthor,'advised Hornwrack. Often enough he had been among the defeated himself. His sudden compassion surprised him nevertheless; and that he should recognise it as such surprised him even further. He looked sidelong at Tomb the Dwarf to see if he had noticed anything, but the dwarf wasn't interested – he only grinned pleasantly and unforgivingly down at the sailors and said, 'There is no enemy in sight now.'

'They are bound by those signatures to help us,'said the Reborn Man less loudly.

They regarded him with puzzlement, and some scorn.

'Go up to the new hall,'was all they said, 'and leave us alone.'And they wandered off along the quay to where the remaining mast of the foundered ship poked up at a strange angle from a scum of floating wreckage. There a smell of lemons clung, as if some bitter dew had condensed on that doomed hull during its confused final voyage. It was an unearthly, chemical smell. The horses hated it.

The crowd, sensing a termination, looked on emptily for a minute or two, then began to disperse – the children drawn by a kind of magnetism toward the wreck while their elders took to the cobbled road which wound up into Iron Chine proper, where they vanished in twos and threes among the little two-storey houses with the wet slate roofs, the drying nets and lines of flaccid laundry. Dulled by the cold and continual privation, they seemed unable to react to a tragedy which, -as someone in Fulthor's party pointed out later, must have involved them all. One woman did stand for a time staring out into the estuary, a few tears drying on her cheeks in the wind. Only then did Hornwrack realise that more than one vessel had been involved. A spatter of rain blew out of the west (where like a great ancient fish there lay in wait the island continent of Fenlen) and into his face. He could see the 'new hall'on a rise above the village. He felt wretched.

'This wind is prising my joints apart,'said Cellur the birdmaker cheerfully. When no-one answered him he gave an impatient shrug.

'These people need more help than they could ever give us,'he told Fulthor. 'When you stop sulking you will see that.'

It came on to rain in earnest as they passed through the Chine. The peeling walls had once been gaily whitewashed, the window-boxes tended; now pale faces observed them from behind the streaming windows. Higher, they found they could look down into the boatyards of St Elmo Buffin, from which rose the masts and spars of his white and fated fleet – rakish three-hulled craft fitted with those peculiar slatted metal sails over which rioted orange lizards, green beetles glowing like fresh tattoos, and subtly distorted geometrical figures. Designed by the Afternoon, built by the Evening, blessed by a new madness of both, they were arming for some invisible war. 'DEATH'proclaimed one sail, and 'LIFE'another, in calligraphies rich and outlandish; while on the decks beneath shipwrights and sailors swarmed like rats.

'No hint of this war has ever come to us in the High City,'said Alstath Fulthor wonderingly. 'It is no wonder they are poverty stricken here.'

Higher still the 'new hall'hung above them like a threat. Sombre, columnar, mysterious of purpose, it had about it a most appalling air of age, an age which emptied out the cultural luggage of Alstath Fulthor's vanished race – all the moral atrocities and philosophical absurdities and expired technologies – and found it meaningless; rendering meaningless in the end even the deserts which were their only legacy to the Evening. As he approached it, wincing from the weather, huddling into his cloak against a wind a million years old, it spoke to Galen Hornwrack from an age fully as naive but by no means as puzzled as his own. It was a survivor of the Morning.

There was a ramshackle new construction perched on its roof like a greenhouse; from this flags were flying which no-one could identify, though Fulthor and the dwarf argued desultorily over their provenance. And down at its ancient front door, his big-knuckled hands clasped like a bunch of dice, stood the solitary principal of that lost maritime demesne, genius of a doomed fleet, St Elmo Buffin.

Elmo Buffin, that sad travesty, with his limbs like peeled sticks! He was seven feet tall and a yellow cloak was draped eccentrically about his bony shoulders. Plate armour of a dull-green colour encased him, sprouting all manner of blunt horns and spurs, little nubs and bosses which seemed chitinous and organic. It pulsed and shivered in its colour, for it had come to him from his father, a Reborn Man of the defunct House of medina-Clane, one of the first to be resurrected by Tomb the Dwarf and now dead. What his mother – a dour Northwoman and fishwife of Iron Chine, whose first husband had died in the War of the Two Queens – had bequeathed him is hard to say.

Neither strain had bred true, for between Afternoon and Evening there is a great genetic as well as temporal gulf. Epilepsy racked him twice a week. His eyes were yellow and queer in that slack clownish face which seemed too large for his thin limbs. His brain heaved like the sea; across it visions came and went like the painted sails of his own fleet. Of years he had twenty-six; but his insanity made of that forty or fifty. Since the death of his father (himself an eccentric but principled man, who had consented to the miscegenation in order to cement the two halves of his bi-racial community) the whole weight of the Chine had rested on his shoulders.

How many of the villagers actually believed in his invisible enemy, or his experimental fleet? It seems immaterial. Those who died at sea knew the truth, as do we. Those that did not were nonetheless inspired by him. And if it did not thrive, well then the village survived. Buffin's success was as a symbol – queasy but enduring – which enabled past and present to collaborate. (His failure lay in underestimation; in being, if you like, not quite mad enough: but that was not to become clear until later, and who anyway could have been quite so mad as to imagine the actual state of affairs?) Now he stood in the doorway of the ancient ball, with its dreadful disregard for the passage of time and its rooftop contraptions worn with the air of a rakish hat, watching from the corner of his eye Fulthor's party as it approached. He was dwarfed by the dark columns. He could not keep still. He rubbed his hands to warm them in the cold air. He leant unconcernedly on the doorpost. Then he must look at his feet to admire his boots. Then, muttering to himself, jerk upright and practise a handshake with some imaginary visitor.

“'News from the City!”'they heard him murmur. 'Shall I say that? No. I must not appear so anxious. Shall I then enquire (thus, with a politic solicitude), “Your journey, it was comfortable?” Manifestly though, it was not -He snapped his fingers impatiently.

'Oh, what shall I say!'

Suddenly he dodged back among the columns and was lost to view. (Though it had no basis, Hornwrack retained for some time an impression of him huddled up there somewhere in the gloom the way a child might huddle breathless and white-faced behind the great half-opened doors of some echoing abandoned palace into which it has wandered; that palace being the world.)

After a moment he called querulously, 'Hello?'

No-one answered. Except for Fay Glass they had all got down from their horses and were staring astonished into the massive fluted shadows. Out popped his head like a crumpled leather bag on a stick, and he tapped the side of it mournfully. 'We're all mad here,'he sighed, as if the village, the boatyards and the ancient stones were all in some

way contained within it: which, Hornwrack supposed, in a way they were. Now he recovered himself, smiling ironically; came forward and clasped Fulthor's hands. 'The briefest of aberrations,'he apologized (at this the mad woman pursed her lips enviously, and sniffed); 'Please forgive me:'and never referred to it again. 'Viriconium has sent observers then, at last!'

Under this misapprehension he led them up a monstrous flight of stairs. They could not correct it because he would not let them speak. He had, he explained, given up hope of ever getting help from the capital. He did not blame the High City for this. Messengers had been sent every six months to Duirinish, which was the regional centre, but patently the messages had not been sent on. This was understandable. In Duirinish they seined to believe that he was quarrelling with some other coastal village. This had not been at all uncommon in the years immediately following the War. What could he do but maintain a philosophical attitude?

Up the vast stairs they went behind him, listening to his monologue float down. His laughter was strained. 'Still, now you have come -His rooms were full of bald light, strange navigational instruments, clutter. In one room the charts had peeled from the wall and lay all along its foot in odd folds. He took them to a thing like a conservatory built right out on to the roof.

'From here I can see twenty miles out to sea.'He smiled proudly, a little pathetically. 'I expect you have more profound instruments in the South.'There was a great maze of tubing made of brass into which he invited them tO look. They bent one by one to the eyepiece. When it was Hornwrack's turn to look, all he saw was a sad reticulated greyness, and, suspended indistinctly against it in the distance, something like a chrysalis or cocoon, spinning and writhing at the end of a thread. 'Success is slow to come with this particular instrument.'Hornwrack shook his head; but Cellur seemed to be fascinated. As they moved from exhibit to exhibit like reluctant tourists in some artist's studio, Buffin sat on a stool with his limbs tense. He was like an exhibit himself in the direct odd light filtering through the whitish panes, legs wound tensely round one another, his face like an apologetic bag. 'It is not an ordinary telescope.'Out to sea. nothing moved.

… The rooms were draughty and seemed deserted. When he ordered refreshments they were brought by an old woman but he served them himself. 'Would you like some of this dried herring?'Money and men were his most urgent requirements, he said (there was besides a shortage of timber). The fleet was fitted but under-crewed. 'Pardon?'He showed them charts; designs; plans for a strategy they could not comprehend. On these maps an

unconventional symbol depicted 'mist'. The island continent of Fenlen was not marked. Hornwrack looked for it but he could not find it.

'The war,'Alstath Fulthor managed to say. 'What is its exact nature?'

Buffin looked surprised.

'Why, it is precisely as you have seen. That is the extent of it.'

He thought for a long time. Then he said that his ships went out well-armed. They were captained by crafty men. At sea they encountered first rough water and adverse currents: then a mist. In the mist was some enemy no-one had ever seen. 'A madness comes over them, and they throw themselves into the water.'Those that did not drown were destroyed by fire; by unimaginable weapons. Some returned. A strange smell clung to their vessels; and they spoke of sounds so appalling as to be beyond description (though they were not loud).

Fulthor began to show signs of impatience. This sort of conjecture was not to his taste. He looked sideways at Hornwrack, who shrugged. Cellur the birdmaker, however, had been listening to every word. 'Have you ever been attacked on land?'he asked.

'For ten years now,'Buffin said absently, 'we have fought a war we cannot see. Since the death of my father something has been out there.'

Fulthor stirred, drew in his breath. 'I can make nothing of this,'he said brusquely to Cellur. 'We cannot concern ourselves with this.'

Buflin blinked at him and went on, 'When the mist rolls inshore at night we can sometimes sense them down there in the fjord, sailing stealthily inland. Where they are going we do not know.'He smiled tiredly. 'I'm sorry, the fish is awful.'Momentarily sponged of its lines, his face regained a young and pliant air. 'I'm glad you've come at last.'

Fulthor got up. He handed over his safe-conducts and his letters of introduction. 'Our mission is urgent,'he said. 'I should like fresh horses if you have them. Otherwise nothing. I'm sorry we cannot help.'

There was a silence.

'That was badly done, Alstath Fulthor,'said Cellur.

Buffin looked at them both. Sleet tapped the milky panes of the greenhouse. Outside, the wind tossed the strings of pennants, and set to swaying the distant mast-tops of the half-completed fleet. A mist was coming in off the sea.

'I dreamt last night of a fatal blunder made while asleep,'said Cellur as they made their way back up to the cliff-top in the blowing sleet. 'A sleepwalker murdered his own son.'

'We have done nothing decent here,'agreed Hornwrack a bit absently. Watching with horror the torment of St Elmo Buffin, he had suddenly begun to think of his own youth, a faithless season spent in

the wet plough of the midlands. He could not quite connect the two except in their antithesis. 'That's certain. Only co-operate in one more High City betrayal.'It was later in the day. They were all mounted on fresh animals. Out of his reverie he gave Alstath Fulthor a look of dislike. (He remembered when it came to it only a touch of dead crysanthemums on the skin in some still-aired room; rooks sweeping over the heavy earth. What he had taken to be unsentimentality with regard to this had turned out to be quite the reverse. In turn, this caused him to think about the Rue Sepile, and all that implied.)

'I thought I recalled the man,'Cellur said. 'Perhaps it was a story, heard long ago. And yet the face was very familiar.'

'Quite.'

'I cannot shake off a sense of foreboding.'

At the top of the cliff, about to turn inland, they were accosted by the spectre of the ancient airboatman. Opening and shutting its mouth like a deformed goldfish, it approached them out of the eddying sleet, rotating slowly about its vertical axis. Although, as before, it appeared to maintain only the most precarious contact with the World, a thin grey snow seemed to be settling on its shoulders, the ghostly precipitate of some foreign continuum. It was agitated. It came very close to Hornwrack and plucked at his cloak. (He felt nothing until he tried to beat it offwith the flat of his hands, when there was some slight, gelatinous resistance.)

'Few lawn!'it shouted through its cupped hands, as from a great distance. 'Fog.. Forn… Fenling. Oh crikey. 'It pointed desperately out to sea. It looked inland and shook its head. 'FENGLIN! nuktis 'agalma… 254 da parte… ten cans for a boat load… *Fengle!'*

And it took up station above his head like a fat angel, staring tragically backwards as they moved inland and signing madly whenever it caught his eye.

Still later, Tomb the Dwarf rode up to his side. He held out the weapon Hornwrack had lost on the quayside.

'You dropped your sword, soldier.'

Hornwrack said bitterly, 'Listen old Dwarf, I thought I had got rid of that. *I am not him.* Whatever he was to you. Don't you understand that?'

The dwarf grinned and shrugged, still holding the sword out expectantly.

Hornwrack looked up at the thing floating above him. Seeing this, it steered itself rapidly toward him, clearing its throat. He groaned, accepted the sword. Both his spectres had returned to haunt him.

The weather now changed. Low cloud and sleet rolled away east and south to be replaced by a pale sky and good visibility. A wind like a razor blew from the north. On a succession of bright but bitterly

cold days they penetrated the habitable margin of the Great Brown Waste, to find a frozen crust over deep, wet peat. Progress was slow. Ifa bird called, *tak tak* like an echo in a stony gully, the madwoman followed it with her eyes, tilting her head; smiled. She was nervous, but now rode ahead of Alstath Fulthor. She had led them into a region of high dissected plateaux over which hummed the icy wind, and then cast about over the bleak hillsides for a while like a lost bitch. Little paths ran everywhere, contouring the salients. As far as anyone could make out she followed them randomly. They led her in the end to a stone-crowned, steep-streamed escarpment which sheltered among its boulder-fields sparse woods ofstunted oak. On its lower slopes might be discerned the lanes and enclosures of a settlement; the walls toppled, the sheepfolds in poor repair. Behind the village rose the eroded shapes of the Agdon Roches, from which it took its name: a string of gritstone outcrops quarried long ago for building stone so that they formed a succession of bays and shattered promontories.

'This is a vile bloody place.'

Hornwrack: Paucemanly's ghost had left him alone for a while, vanishing with a wet pop and a feeble grin as if remembering a prior appointment. He was relieved, but found himself with nothing to think about but the cold. He was used to the city, where winter is episodic. The wind whistles across the junction of the Rue Sepile and Vientiane Avenue. The women clutch their shawls tightly and dash laughing from house to house. There is always a window to watch them from while you drink mulled wine prepared by *a* boy. Not so here: his fingers were welded to the reins like the fingers of a stone horseman falling apart in some provincial square. He had been miserable for days.

'I've seen worse,'said the dwarf speculatively, as if he wondered whether he had. He wore his leather hat at a queer angle; his arms were empurpled with the cold.

The wreckage of an ancient landscape lay across their path.

The metaphysical disputes of the late Afternoon Cultures, raging here across the flood-plain of some vanished river, had turned it into a corridor of black ash strewn with rounded stones. It was zoned and undulating; in places stripped to the underlying rock, ten or twenty feet thick in places. Every summer a little more of it dried up and blew away into the Waste. Some of the stones were quite large, some no bigger than a fist, and each stood on a little pediment of wind-smoothed ash. Some isolated colonies of bilberry and ling grew here and there, raised by the same erosive process until they resembled a chain of hairy islets Outlier or prefigurement of the deeper Waste to come, it was a little less than two miles wide, and across it could be seen the cracked buttresses of the Agdon Roches, brushed at their

summits with rosy light. A thin white mist flowed down the gullies and stony cloughs at their feet, drifting through the hanging oakwoods and filling up the village street so that only the roofs and upper storeys of the cottages were visible. 'Through the still air a dog could be heard barking; sheep bleated from the intakes. In a small field stood one cow. All this one might almost have touched, so precisely-enamelled did it seem on the bright surface of the air: but Fay Glass would make no move towards it.

'She is frightened of the maze.'

'And yet,'said Fulthor, returning from a brief foray, 'her own people must have made it.'Damp ash was caked between the fingers of his gauntlets. The discovery of the earthwork had filled him with an obscure excitement. Her subsequent refusal to enter or even pass it seemed only to have sharpened this. 'They were obsessed by patterns, those who came north in the final desperate days of the Resurrection determined to discover a way back.'He smiled whitely. 'As if the fingers of the Past do not already brush our cheeks, waking or sleeping – 'He stared back into the maze. 'She is a child, I'm afraid.'

('We gave them life,'the dwarf said. 'How were we to know they would go mad?'No-one answered him.)

'It is not just the woman,'said Cellur. 'I feel it too.'And he looked out over the little strip of land. 'Error is piled on error.'

'Nevertheless, we go through,'announced Fulthor, setting the madwoman on her horse.

'There. You shall sit safely. It was bravely done to guide us so far.'

She looked at him as if he were a stone.

The basic earthwork, cut into the compacted ash, was supplemented partly by piles of stones, partly by raised banks or dykes: the whole being roughly radial in character and some fifteen feet deep. Are we to guess its purpose? In the Time of the Locust sign and substance become fatally blurred together: it was not so much a maze, perhaps, as a great ideogram, a design representing some barely-achievable state of mind; but this said, we have said nothing. Down in the trenches the ash showed evidence of regular traffic, and cold, damp airs moved purposelessly. Fulthor's motives were unclear. He could equally well have crossed the plain to reach the village. He would not discuss this. He became lost but was slow to admit it. When he did the girl would not help him, though she had plainly been in the maze before. He set Tomb to climbing one of the walls, but the stuff fell away in fibrous lumps when he was near the top and he slid down in a shower of it without having seen anything. 'I seemed to be facing south.'

Thereafter, they travelled at random.

An hour passed (they came upon the hoofprints of their own

animals, travelling in the opposite direction) and then another.

A bird flying overhead; the exchange of arguments at a junction; all normal events receded and became stripped of meaning. Queer contractile sensations in Hornwrack's skull recalled to him his colourless Low City fevers with their intimations of failure and death. (At these times a desultory buzzing had filled his ears, as of a wasp trapped among the dry geraniums in some airless attic: he heard it now.) Looking uncomfortably round he saw that the others were similarly affected. The whole party had halted. Near him the dwarf was shaking his big head about and blinking desperately. Fay Glass had somehow fallen off her horse and lay on the ground glaring madly up at the sky. The walls of the maze began to mutate, and beckoned Hornwrack with limbs like the first delicately-curled fronds of a fern in spring.

Now the world toppled sideways with a jolt, as it sometimes does on the verge of sleep. Simultaneously he began to perceive it as if through a cluster of tiny hexagonal lenses: for a moment he looked out with horror on to a faceted universe. He could make nothing of it. He though he was dying.

Fay Glass vomited suddenly; leapt to her feet and ran off down the passage. Hornwrack followed more slowly, leading his horse, concentrating very carefully in case the ground should tilt further and spill him off into the mosaic void he now conceived to be surrounding him. He could hear the other three tottering along behind him, crying out like the newly blind.

The maze, he now understood, had lain in wait for him since his flight from the Bistro Californium, its centre coexistent with the hub of that affair. As he struggled down its cindery passageways he imagined himself stabbed again and again, a half successful execution presided over by the mad laughter of the poet Ansel Verdigris. He lost his horse. Clutching the phantom wound in his side he groaned and drew his flawed steel knife (as if a gesture remembered from one maze might release him from the complexities of another). Despairing, he stumbled out into a circular space about thirty feet across; where he was relieved abruptly of the mosaic universe, and saw normally again. This central stage or arena was raised a few inches above the level of the surrounding maze, and in the middle of it there waited an *insect larger than a man* -The violation, if there was one, was hieratic, notional. Fay

Glass lay like a corpse. *The creature crouched over her.* It resembled no insect Hornwrack had ever seen but was rather a *composite of all insects.* From it *segmented thorax,* which was of a curious *smokyyellow colour* and as shiny as lacquered bamboo, sprang the veiny *wings of the ichneumonfly,* the wedge shaped mask of the common wasp, the

mysterious *upcurved abdomen of the mantis like a symbol* from a forbidden language. Its *eyes* were lit from within, or seemed to be. They were *pale green,* and streaked with orange. A mass of palps and maxillae hung beneath its head, clattering spasmodically. He though of the wasteland grasshopper with its serrated legs and arid stridulations. He thought of flight through vast abandoned regions, and the world he knew fell away from him so suddenly that he was sick. When he could see again, the madwoman had come back to life.

She made no attempt to get from beneath the insect; but, like something emerging painfully from a larval stage, groped and writhed about until she lay on her stomach, her neck twisted so that her white motionless face was turned to the assassin.

'I,'she said; and retched dryly. She licked her lips. 'We.'

'I can't help you,'said Hornwrack.

The insect, he saw, was damaged. The raised and elongated prothorax from which issued its frail forelimbs was covered in cuts and gouges, some of them deep enough to reveal the whitish stored fat beneath. Crusted secretions rimmed its unearthly eyes. From time to time it scraped aimlessly in the ashes at its feet or beat wildly its filmy wings.

'We see your world,'said the madwoman. 'Killing is all dead world. World killed. We are all killed here.'

Her voice was flat and mournful. It seemed to come from a huge distance away. In the pauses between the words Hornwrack himself became an insect. He flew through the great derelict spaces, shaken by compulsions he did not understand. Many others were there with him. A hunger drove them, presiding and unproductive. They fell into a choking air and were consumed.

'We now press your heads. Our words are pressing your heads. Your world presses us. Oh. Gah. '

The creature flailed its forelimbs against the ground until one of them fell off.

'Gah,'said Fay Glass. 'Help. Oh.'

Hornwrack rushed forward and tried to haul her from under the clattering mandibles. She would not come. He felt the huge triangular mask dip toward him. He shouted and ran away again, slashing out blindly with his knife. Tomb the Dwarf came out of the maze and touched his elbow. They both ran forward and this time pulled her out. The dwarf lost his hat. 'I. We. Oh,'whined Fay Glass; while the insect's nervous system underwent some fresh deterioration, causing it to writhe, fan the air, and curl its abdomen repeatedly over its head. These spasms were replaced by a curious immobility which in turn affected the madwoman. She lay on the floor like a pupating grub, the ends of her fingers bleeding where she had bitten them. The insect

looked like a great enamelled brooch dug up from some depraved old city. Hornwrack and the dwarf watched it warily. It stared back, its eyes enigmatic, crusted. A faint smell of lemons hung about it: and behind that rotting cabbage.

'It sees us,'whispered Tomb. He licked his lips. 'What did she say?'Then: 'Can it see us?'

Hornwrack was too out of breath to speak.

The Reborn Men do not think as we do, but live -pursued by an incomprehensible past – among distempered waking dreams. Alstath Fulthor wanderd into the centre of the maze from quite another entrance, his gait stilted. He stared at the insect in astonishment, flung a hand up in front of his face: a long groan came out of his mouth. He looked like some exotic mantis in his blood red armour. Attracted perhaps by this the insect turned with a *clack clack* of coxal joints to face him. (Hornwrack and the dwarf were now able to see the curious markings on its abdomen, the three black diagonal bars or fascia running across each wing.) He walked round it groaning, his head working as if his neck contained bent clockwork. Plainly he thought he was in a dream of the Afternoon, for he murmured to himself of Arnac san Tehn and the 'Yellow Gardens'. Now they faced one another again; and if Fulthor looked like an insect, then the thing before him with its hacked yellow prothorax resembled an armoured man. Fulthor glanced down at the energy blade spitting and fizzing in his hand. He hit the insect across the head with it, bursting an eye, cutting into the thorax and shearing off one of its legs.

It fell over on its side and dragged itself round in a circle, a high whining sound coming from its wings. Fay Glass darted about shrieking. Fulthor hit it again; watched its redoubled frenzies with his head tilted intelligently on one side; then dropped his weapon, which immediately began fusing the ash around it into glass. 'Oh, the great cups!'he cried. 'The thousand flowers and roses! The thought with the force of a sensation!'He stared imploringly over at Hornwrack then picked up his sword again and ran off into the maze, his eyes wide and his body leaning at an incredible angle to the vertical.

The mutilated insect had fetched up against one of the cindery walls and was trying to climb it. Ash showered down. Fay Glass wept, 'Wait, we are killed here. Vienna, Blackpool, Venice, drown in their own tears. Press our world. Oh. Oh.'Above her head there materialised suddenly the ghost of Benedict Paucemanly, flabby face full of fear. It grimaced apologetically – 'Fenlen! Fenlen!'- and was carried away on some psychic current, waving its arms. Dark clouds had blown up from the west, and now a scatter of hard snow filled the grey air, pattering off the carapace of the insect, which lay motionless in a corner, a flicker of orange animating its remaining eye. The ground

was ploughed up all around it. Fay Glass, exhausted, was walking round and round the central area with her hands over her face, moaning.

Hornwrack stared at the churned earth; the wreckage of the insect. He shuddered.

'Look after her,'he told Tomb the Dwarf. 'Try and find Cellur. Tell him about this. He may understand what is happening here.'And with that he set off into the maze in search of the Reborn Man.

8: Galen Hornwrack and the New Invasion

Down ran Alstath Fulthor, last representative of his House, a scarlet figure with a stride like an ostrich's; and down ran Hornwrack the assassin after him, the breath rattling in his lungs. The maze was behind them, the village before. In the maze, fearing the hidden junction, the sudden mad leap and mantid clutch, the bared teeth of an ambush, Hornwrack had drawn the old sword; out there on the plain it dragged down his arm. Westward the land was all as dark as the sky, long black salients reaching back beneath the cold clouds, their flanks scored by steep-sided valleys and dotted with piles of haunted stones. In the east a little of the early brightness remained to pick out the shattered towers of the Agdon Roches, to touch the escarpment and its oakwoods with a lichenous grey. Mist still choked the village beneath, thick and slow; but a new wind had stirred out in the Waste and was beginning to tease its edges out in streamers, like sheep's wool caught on a fence. The light infused these strands with a delicate yellow; and they smelt strongly of lemons.

Alstath Fulthor flung up his arms and was engulfed. Hornwrack followed, with a desperate cry.

The mist enwrapped them, it stuffed their lungs with cotton wool. They passed like two coughing ghosts along the silent village street. The cottages that loomed on either side were tenantless, dusty and cold, their front doors lodged open and creaking in the small winds which seemed to inhabit the inside of the mist. From the empty rooms behind issued dry smells. Birdlime was spattered beneath the eaves, and the gutters were choked with old nests. Sacking lifted in the wind; lifted, dropped, and lifted again.

Alstath Fulthor drew ahead. He became a shadow, and then only a thud of footfalls. Hornwrack ran on, isolated and a little afraid. Death, he saw, had been there before them; perhaps a month, perhaps two months before. A dead man hung half in and half out of a broken window beneath the spattered eaves. Another sat like a bundle of sticks propped up in the angle of a stone wall. They observed one another dryly, as if some old joke had recently passed between them. Their weapons were orange with rust but their bodies, instead of decomposing, seemed to have shrunk, and were as intact as tight old sheaves of straw tied up in ancient sacking; as though the mist in advancing one process of decay had retarded the other. The village was full of corpses, staring out of doorways, caught in contorted attitudes on the grass round the horse trough – looking surprised or

complacent or out of breath. Others had drawn their knives and had been about to throw themselves on some enemy. A few children had fallen down during a game in which they followed one another stealthily among the houses, hands held hooked above their heads.

“'They sail inland all night,” 'thought Hornwrack, and for a moment the face of St Elmo Buffin came into his mind, decent, puzzled, wistful. “'Where they are going we do not know -“'

They had been coming here. Wherever they had come from they had ended up here, standing at salient junctions like abandoned machines, their broken antennae and cracked wings dangling in the wind, their compound eyes as dull as stones. Patches of corruption darkened the ground beneath them like tarry shadows, as if vital fluids had bled slowly from abdomen and thorax to fertilize a crop of bluish mushrooms and unearthly moulds before drying-up altogether. With this dessication had come the slow retreat of the intelligence into the husk, the drying up of the violent insectile telepathies received by Hornwrack and the others in the maze, those incidental broadcasts from the mosaic universe which had driven Buffin's sailors to burn their own ships or drown themselves in the fogbound sea.

At night, its mad energy not quite spent, a disembodied head bounced down the gutters of Hornwrack's Low City dreams, accompanied by the laughter of the crackpot poet: plainly it had originated here among these dilapidated hulks, one out of three of which had fallen under the energy blades of the Reborn villagers and, curious viscera exposed in section, now lay surrounded by a litter of amputated limbs. Someone had cut it off and sent it south as a call for help. The rest of them, though they showed a few shallow cuts and scrapes made by less exotic weapons, like violent scribbles on a lacquered screen – had evidently succumbed to the same disease as the lone survivor in the maze. Crusted discharges had swollen their joints. Strings of hardened mucus hung from the curious appendages attached by leather straps to their facial parts. They faced one another in the mechanistic postures of their death, and a faint whisper of telepathy was draped about them like a cobweb. It touched the inside of his skull as he ran dreaming between them, afraid they would come back to life if he lingered.

He ducked beneath a complicated snout. He pushed aside a canted crackling wing. He waved the old sword about until his arm ached. Later he might recall this: now he knew nothing. The wings of the wasteland locust rustled uneasily in his head, gathering for some vast migration. He no longer cared about Alstath Fulthor, running ahead in the mist. He leapt and sang like a grasshopper, and his progress had become a flight.

(Alive or dead, he managed to think, they have altered the Earth;

they have changed it manifestly. Something has come into it…

… And thinking this, emerged from the village.) It was like a door opening and closing. When he looked back the mist was streaming away along the foot of the escarpment in the new wind, and the three small figures of Cellur, Tomb and Fay Glass, issuing uncertainly from the maze, had begun to cross the plain.

Hornwrack and Fulthor confronted in a stony cleft among dwarf birch and oak. A chalky light, slanting down between the brittle boughs on to banks of heather and bilberry, revealed the Reborn Man sitting quietly on an unfinished millstone, his features as white and careworn as those of a praying king. A pied bird absorbed his attention: it hopped from stone to stone, tilting its small bright eye to watch him. Chill airs rattled the twigs above his head, stirred his yellow hair. The *baan* in his hand flickered like a firework in the hand of a child; he had forgotten it. Votive and calm in his scarlet armour, he looked like the invalid knight in the old painting; and the overhanging towers of the Agdon Roches, with their silent gullies and damp sandy courses, rose up behind him through a screen of black branches like the buttresses of an ancient chapel.

When Hornwrack pushed his way through the oaks, old leaves and lichenous dust showered down; and the little bird flew away.

'Fulthor?'

The wounded king wakes and slates about him with a newfear. He has risen from the devotions of one nightmare into the ruins of another. 'Where is this place?'he'll whisper. None will speak. 'Back then!'he'll cry, sweeping the great baan round his head in an arc which makes the sound of panicked wings. Shadows fly like wounded doves from horizon to horizon. Precarious flowers bloom in his secret heart …

'Hornwrack! Am I mad?'A bitter laugh. 'Another dream. More days lost in the absolute abyss of Time. Oh, the fiery woman, with her expressionless eyes! How long have I been away?'

And he advanced dreamily on Hornwrack, still swinging the energy blade.

'Fulthor!'screamed Hornwrack, who saw no magical king (who could blame him? He had been born three millenia too late) and who failed to hear the hum of that long declining dream: 'It's me!'He ducked the lethal stroke; offered the old steel sword (its tip was lopped off instantly); stepped in desperately close and hammered Fulthor's wrist with the pommel of his trusty knife. Nerveless, the white hand opened. The *baan* fell. Fulthor gave a howl of despair and sat down suddenly. 'Must I always choose between there and here?'He regarded Hornwrack from between his hands. 'Kill me then.'He looked round. 'Where are we?'

Hornwrack, however, was no longer interested.

The ghost of Benedict Paucemanly had reappeared, to float over the oakwood mouthing like a drowned sailor; and through its unsteady, half-transparent shape he had caught a sudden glimpse of the horizon. There, insectile silhouettes processed slowly against a greenish sky, full of bitter snow. They seemed to carry with them an unquiet cobalt halo; along their sides flared sphenograms of an acid green; they held their forelegs delicately raised. Over the summits of the Agdon Roches they went, southwards, with an exquisite mechanical concentration, looking neither left nor right.

The world started to melt like candle wax.

Hornwrack got Fulthor somehow to his feet. Unspeaking, they descended the hill.

Snow whirled round them. Roots caught at their feet. Paucemanly encouraged them with whistles and farts.

'I really mean it, you blokes – ten thousand nights were put in one! There I lay, listening to the winds gathering in the dry places, the abandoned places. We're all in it now, us and them, raw-blind on the waterstair at Shadwell Pier like burnt rats! Phew! The white Moon makes thus “the stair of our descent…“ There was more of this. 'Ooh, what you must think of me I don't know,'he would exclaim fishily; and then, screwing up his eyes behind the faceplate of his abominable mask, bawl -'Felneck! Fandle! FENLEN!'

– his queer epicene voice hooting across the hillside like a signal while, above, the insectile procession moved on imperturbably: south, south, south…

The new wind, rushing blindly out of the east under a cavernous overcast, had brought black obscurity to the village, whose streets were now full of flying chemical ice blown in from the Deep Waste. The dead insects at each corner creaked and shifted in the gale. Their eyes were pitted and stony. Above them splinters of chitin, sections of antennae and shattered veiny wing floated and spun in the rooftop eddies like the rubbish of the Low City rattling round the chimneys below Alves on a blustery night. Hornwrack leaned on Alstath Fulthor, his eyes rimed with urgent ice, the words blown out of his mouth and every thought out of his skull. They came down the main street like drunks in the weak glow of Fulthor's armour. All else was shadowy, hard to interpret. Dead men leaned conversationally forward as they passed, then toppled on to empty faces, limbs breaking away like the rotten limbs ofscarecrows to go bounding off down the road and lodge in a fence.

Cellur the birdmaker awaited them at the centre of the village, where the wind was whipping spray off the horse trough and the front doors were banging on rooms inhabited only by mice and suffocated children. He had with him Tomb the Dwarf. From the debacle in the

maze they had retrieved three horses and the pony, which now stood in the street shifting bad-temperedly with each fresh gust of wind:

tTomb was redistributing the surviving baggage between them as if in preparation for a further journey into the deep madness of the World. This activity made an island of humanity in the rushing gloom, at the approaches of which hovered the madwoman, wrapped from head to foot in a thick whitish garment and turning aimlessly this way and that like something hanging from a privet branch.

Alstath Fulthor looked emptily at this scene as if he recognized no-one in it, then sat down in the road. Hornwrack, tugging at his arm, heard the birdmaker shout 'Ride! West, for your life!'He shook his head. 'Wait!'He wasn't sure he had heard correctly. The old man had got up on his horse now and was watching them impatiently, his embroidered cloak streaming in the wind. The dwarf ran round checking saddlebags, tightening girths, and urging the inert Fay Glass into her saddle by means of pantomimic threats. The wind rose and fell cynically, tugging at the dry husks of the insects. The horses milled about, sensing an imminent departure. Hornwrack let go of Fulthor's wrist (“Black piss! Stay there, then, if you must!”) and caught at the birdmaker's stirrup instead. The horse dragged him off his feet, the old man's yellow face swam above him, alive with what he took to be fear. They were in an eddy or pocket in the gale.

'In the maze,'said Cellur, 'my errors were made plain. Much, if not all, is now clear to me. I cannot yet explain the ghost – 'he prodded Hornwrack's shoulder, pointed up into the wrack where Paucemanly bobbed, smirking and bowing like a butler – 'but I have at last learnt what he was trying to tell us.

'You must go and rouse Iron Chine. Pray that St Elmo Buffin, a man ill-used by circumstance, is not as mad as he seems! Tell him the time has come to launch his fleet. Tell him help is on its way.'He smiled bitterly. 'Lunatics and ghosts – all along they have had the right of it!'For a second he stared slack-faced and frightened into the west, his hooded eyes human for once. (After all, he is out in the world now, thought Hornwrack – who sympathized, being newly out in it himself- like a crab out of its shell: what guarantees has he left? And again: What can he fear after ten thousand years?) He made a cutting motion with his hand. 'Still. I was slow to connect these things. I have been too content tosit by and let Fulthor lead. Now Fulthor has failed me, and there it

Is.

'Fenlen, the island continent, is infested. They have been established there since they poured down from the Moon eleven years ago. (I looked on like a fool. What else could I have done? I forget.) But they cannot bear Earth's airs: and when their scouts fly inland low

over the sea, which they do night and day, they do so surrounded by an atmosphere of their own manufacture. By day they blunder into Buffin's sailors. They are as motiveless and mad as the men they kill. They do not belong here.'

He gestured at the empty village, the creaking husks. 'Can you doubt it? Yet they are trying to make the air over to suit them. This is only the beginning.'He shuddered. 'They will remake the Earth, if they can. Rouse Iron Chine, Hornwrack. I ride now to the capital. Delay me no longer!'

Hornwrack hung on to the stirrup. All he could think of to say was, 'Something is the matter with Alstath Fulthor. Up on the escarpment he tried to kill me.'

'Oh, I am in hell,'said Alstath Fulthor, shaking his head. He had come up behind them silently, the *baan* like a live thing in his hand. 'I am not myself.'Tomb the Dwarf, who had tightened the final strap, tried to take the weapon away from him for his own good. 'Come on, old friend.'They rolled about in the road, cursing and biting. Fulthor wriggled away and got up again. 'Come down off your horse,'he ordered, 'and explain all this. Why, up there, great *cock-a-roaches* walk along the ridge!'He pointed in the wrong direction. (The dwarf crawled away holding his face and spitting.) 'Or is it in my head?'He shrugged, smiled shyly; lurched off. Fay Glass woke up and looked at him sharply. Keeping a wary eye on the dwarf, she got off her horse.

Suddenly they both began singing, 'We are off to Vegys now.'Hornwrack looked on appalled. 'Fal di la di a.'

(When he fled through the High City like a bleeding king, in a sweat of fear in the middle of the night, and hoped no-one would notice; when he muttered in the palace the nine, long, alchemical names of his House, and hoped no-one would hear: all heard, all knew but himself. Alstath Fulthor:

the past was pulling him down.)

'When we first met,'said Cellur, 'he spoke to me often of memory, which he conceived of as a hidden stream, himself perched on its bank looking into the water. Also of something which hovered like a dragonfly over the moment of his reawakening in the desert at Knarr.'He sighed. 'What did he kill down there in the maze? Nothing you or I saw. All this has hastened the inevitable.

'Soon he will be as mad as the woman. She will help him. You must help them both. It is why I brought you.'

'I brought myself, old man.'

'Be that as it may.'

'What am I todo?'

'Earn what you were given,'said Tomb the Dwarf, and meant, perhaps, the sword. 'I believe you'll get no other pay.'He was in a bad

temper. He wiped his pocked old nose on the back of his hand to show what he thought of it all, and pushed his sodden conical hat firmly down on to his head. 'You were not brought but bought,'he said with a hard grin. 'Goodbye Hornwrack.'Hauling himself up into his saddle he added, 'We'll go back across the Waste to Duirinish – for it's quicker if you know the paths and don't mind old battles or old lizards – and thence to Viriconium. Cellur fears the Sign of the Locust. He fears for the Queen. He does not quite know what he fears.'He looked about him like a man expecting rain. 'I fear this. Still: one way or another I dare say we shall all have some heads to cut off before long. Do you look after the mad folk.'And he gave the pony vigorous kicks until it consented to move off into the weather. Teetering on the edge of visibility for a moment, dwarf and pony made a curious uncouth silhouette, a composite creature above which flew like a flag on its long haft the curved evil blade of the power-axe. 'Never say I disliked you!'The eyes of the pony before it turned its head away were a flat and empty green.

Out there Cellur waited impatiently, staring west or south. 'Rouse Iron Chine!'came a faint cry through the crack and belly of the gale. Hornwrack never saw either of them again. 'On the shores of the diamond lake,'sang the madwomen in a weird voice,

'We shall watch the fishes, On the summits of the mountains Cry “Erecthalia!”

We are off to Vegys now. '

The weather closed in. He was alone. Even the ghost of Benedict Paucemanly, part at least of its purpose accomplished, had gone out like a candle. In the deserted village it might as easily have been evening as afternoon. Out of the crepuscular sky issued a thin snow which drifted up behind the dry corpses, blew into the empty rooms, and plastered itself to the windward eaves. Every so often the wind from the Deep Waste mingled with it a scatter of old ice, flinging it down the street like two handfuls of dirty glass beads. He rubbed the back of his neck. How had he come to be stranded in the cold north with two lunatics, and no option but to go and look for a third? After Iron Chine he would make his way south along the coast, since he knew no other route (that inhospitable strand, with its distant illusions and tottering cliffs, now seemed familiar and comforting); he would lose himself again in the Low City. Perhaps he would find the boy. He would kill the dwarf if he ever had the chance.

All this time, off at the edge of his awareness, faint telepathies crawled like maggots round the rim of a saucer. Up there on the Agdon scarp was a stealthy and purposeful movement, too far away to hurt him yet, too close for comfort. Suddenly he became frightened that. they would come down unexpectedly and discover him among

their dead. What delicate revenge might they take? In any case he could not bear their thoughts in his skull. Two horses had been left him for three people. Feverishly he urged the madwoman up on to one of them; and then with his hand on his knife approached the Reborn Man, wishing the dwarf had captured the *baan* during their brief scuffle beneath the horse. Eyeing him with a sad amusement, Fulthor said, 'I will run beside you. It is not so far.'

The ramshackle conservatory of St Elmo Buflin, with its invented flags and fantastic telescopes, teetered high above the fish docks of the port, full of silence, brackish air and the smell of the food they had been served there a week or more ago. Buffin sat as if he had not moved since then, in a high-backed chair surrounded by plates of congealed herring. He had taken off his, father's armour and underneath was swathed in some dirty white stuff, linen or flannel, as if he suffered with his joints. He was staring at nothing, his long thin legs thrust out in front of him and crossed as though they belong to someone else, his baglike face crumpled and desperate. His instruments lay smashed. They were no more or less meaningful for it: nests of bent brass tubing, complex coloured lenses pulled apart like sugared anemones underfoot. The charts he had ripped down, to reveal the walls beneath. He had lost his patience with them, perhaps.

Hornwrack wiped the condensation from a cracked pane, looked out.

'You need not have done this to yourself,'he said.

It was such a waste. He felt hot and angry, cold and remote, all at once.

'What happened here?'

Buffin did not answer for a long time. The Afternoon had betrayed him again, and the old powered knife with which he had tried to kill himself now lay sputtering feebly in his lap, its energies spent at last. Some blood had flowed, then dried brown. He did not seem to be able to move his head. The silence drew out. Wondering if he was already dead, Hornwrack waited, breathing evenly and trying to make out what was happening in the port below.

'What does it matter?'came the eventual answer. Then, after another long pause: 'Of the fleet I ordered the uncompleted part destroyed. It is of no use now. Viriconium will never help us now.'He laughed quietly. 'The rest has sailed, into madness and death. The mist surrounds us (can you not hear it? It is like bells!) and all has failed.'

He bit his bottom lip. 'I dare not move my head,'he said, staring forward at nothing, fingering the hilt of the useless knife. 'Can you see what I have done?'

'Your throat is cut,'said Hornwrack, breathing on the glass. 'But not well.'

If he wiped a circle on the glass with the palm of his hand he could see framed in it the black original buildings of the fjord squatting like toads on the lower slopes. To his right a cliff swept up, also black, and laced for five hundred feet with icy ledges. Until recently ice had locked the harbour: now churned and broken sheets of it bobbed in the black channels cut by the departed fleet. Beneath him banks of white vapour hung, drifting sluggishly down the cobbled slopes toward the shrouded quays. In places it was deep enough to cover the upper casements of the cottages as **it** was driven reluctantly between them by the bitter intermittent wind; in others, where it was shallower, he thought he could see heads and torsos going about above it on some cryptic dislocated errand. The suggestion of movement beneath it he tried to ignore. Above all this in the green subarctic sky, aurorae flickered, and great streaks of red and black cloud mimicked the flame and smoke beneath, where men ran despairingly among the boatyards with torches, setting fire to their labour of years.

Death was written in the scrollwork at the bows, death on the painted sterns and the ornate brass bells.'DEATH', proclaimed the painted sails, while the white decks beneath bubbled and charred, generating a heat fierce enough to melt the metal masts. Ash whirled into the air, unknown incandescent alloys showered down, last fruit of that doomed collaboration between Afternoon and Evening (which now pursue their separate courses, as we know). Rolling into the flames, the mist turned them instantly green and blue; and was itself transformed with a roar into a greyish powdery smoke which, sucked up in the merciless updraughts, bellied out above the doomed craft in a choking spherical cloud. Spars flared and fell. Ratlines parted with the sound of a broken violin. Here and there a man was trapped in a tangle of ropes, or caught among the stays beneath a blazing bowsprit with no-one to hear his cries. At the height of the fire a single painted sail escaped its ties, unfurled, billowed upward. For a brief moment a pair of great illusory lizards danced in the air! -only to sink with a regretful whisper and be consumed, writhing amid the smoke in a counterfeit of the pain in St Elmo Buffin's frigid, frightened stare.

'I had no life,'said Buffin, 'even as a child.'Hornwrack bent close to the cold lips to hear. 'My father bade me, “Watch the sea.”'

'I've had no life either,'said Hornwrack.

He forced himself to look through the one surviving telescope. At first he could see nothing. A sailor rushed into the room behind him shouting, 'Buffin, they are among us in the fog!'Seeing Hornwrack he halted uncertainly. A pleading note entered his voice. 'Buflin, only one ship

remains. Let us take you aboard her!'

'He is dead,'said Hornwrack, who now discerned a sad grey ground, and against that something spinning at the end of a thread. 'What's happened here?'

'A fog followed us ashore this morning. The women and children are all dead of it.'He stared at Hornwrack's back. 'Great *locusts* inhabit it!'

'They are your longtime enemy. Where does this last ship sail?'

'West, after the fleet, as he would have wished.'

Spinning, spinning.

'Take me then,'said Hornwrack, 'instead.'

He turned from the telescope and went out of the door. In the empty room a masked figure materialised briefly in the air above the corpse, and was gone.

During the journey from Agdon Roches, Alstath Fulthor had regained a measure of his sanity – that is to say he now remembered where and, to an extent, who he was; but the girl had chopped his hair to a ragged stubble one night while he slept, giving him something of her own hollow-eyed, perpetually-surprised expression; and his skin had taken on a bleached unearthiy look, like a saint's. They were often together, reciting the rhymes that comprised her vocabulary, practising the scraps of meaningless dialogue and lists of non-existent cities which seemed to be her 'keys'to the Past. Fulthor was learning, in the way the child of an exile learns those bits and pieces of its heritage that remain (and which, after so much repetition, undergo a sea-change, bearing less and less relationship to a vanished culture in a land it has never seen). Hornwrack tried to ignore their public tendernesses, their strange, almost unemotional sexual contacts; and clothed his embarrassment in a characteristic surliness.

He found them now down in the port, two tall, awkward figures wrapped in cloaks, standing uncomfortably near the burning boatyards. Despite the heat and smoke they were waiting exactly where he had left them, the flames reflected in their calm odd eyes. Later, at the rail of the last ship, watching the sailors warp her sadly from the bleak shore, Fulthor seemed disposed to talk. He was lucid, polite, aware:

but each new immersion in the stream of memory had carried him further from his Evening existence and its events; and he had forgotten his earlier shoddy treatment of St Elmo Buffin. So when he asked, 'How then did the shipwright die?'it was cruel of Hornwrack to reply,

. 'He cut his own throat, but it was you he died of.'

Iron Chine would not survive him. Fires had now sprung up among the cottages, set by the sailors before they left; and small flames danced behind the panes of the dilapidated conservatory above

the town. The strip of black water between the boat and the quay grew wider. The frigid cliffs slipped past; the curious flags and strips of coloured rag flying over the conservatory blazed up one by one; above everything burned the clouds, like the bloody auroral sunset of some other planet.

What happened to the fleet of St Elmo Buffin? It was not provisioned well. He had given small thought to navigating

it. Much of it was lost immediately amid the white water and foul ground, the atrocious currents and uncharted islands which outlie the jagged coast of Viriconium. Much of it, hampered by the ice which formed on decks and rigging, turned quietly turtle in the gelid sea. There were fogs, too, lying in hundred-mile banks across the straits which separate Fenlen from Iron Chine; and in these the greatest loss was incurred. Each ship fought alone, wrapped in a dreamlike shroud of pearly light. Ice burned like alum on the ratlines and stays. There were collisions, mutinies, accidental fires and shouts as of other men desperate and dying beyond the nacreous wall of fog. It was in all aspects a lost venture. The fog smelled of rotting fruit; and at the sound of wings men leapt overboard or cut their own throats, staring dumbly for a last few seconds at a universe faceted like an insect's eye. One ship survived.

Imagined a low dark coastline shelving back through a series of eroded fossil beaches into a desolation which makes the deepest waste of Viriconium seem like a water-meadow. Nothing lives about these beaches but limpets and kelp; a few curiously furtive terns which survive for the most part by eating one another's eggs; and in season a handful of deformed seals. Chemical rivers make their way here from the continental marshes north and west; tars and oils from sumps a thousand years old and a thousand miles inland trickle sluggishly down the terraces of black pumice, staining them emerald green, ochre, purple. Imagine a glaucous ocean; a low swell at the freezing point, lapping at the brutal shore. Strings and bulbs of mineral pigment wave beneath the water like weed, growing from the chemical silt. There is no wind to speak of. Out to sea about a mile, a bank of mist is rolling south, parallel to the coast.

Imagine a white ship: rudderless, masts bent beneath their load of ice.

Her deckplates are up, buckled like lead foil, her wheelhouse blackened by the same fire which lately ate into her hull amidships. Her figurehead hangs loose in a wreck of stays, a partly human form difficult of exact description. She is down at the stern and listing to starboard. Silently, captured by some current invisible from the shore, she is drawn in toward the beach; quicker and quicker until she rams the stained pumice shelves with a groan and, ripped open, goes over

by the bow and begins to sink. A few birds fly up from her yards. Chips of ice rattle down. A sail, partly unfurled by the shock of the collision, shows a great drunken beetle to the empty beach. Bedded in the poisonous silt, she will settle no further, but nudges the shore with every wave.

After a few minutes a grotesque shape begins to form in the cold air above her shattered deck, like a crude figure of a man projected somehow on a puff of steam.

9: The Explanations of the Ancient Airboatman

Midwinter clutches the Pastel City, cold as thought.

In the Cispontine Quarter the women have been to and fro all day gathering fuel. By afternoon they had stripped the empty lots to the bare hard soil, bobbing in ragged lines amid the sad induviate stems of last year's growth, their black shawls giving them the air of rooks in a potato field. Not an elder or bramble is left now but it is a stump; and that will be grubbed up tomorrow by some enterprising mattock in a bony hand. At twilight, which – exhaled, as it were, from every shattered corner – comes early to the City's broken parts, they filled the nearby streets for half-an-hour, hurrying westwards with their unwieldy bundles to where, along the Avenue Fiche and the Rue Sepile, Margery Fry Road and the peeling old 'Boulevard Saint Ettiene', the old men sat waiting for them with souls shrivelled up like walnuts in the cold. Now they sit by reeking stoves, using the ghost of a dog-rose to cook cabbage!

Cabbage! The whole of the Low City has smelt of this delicacy all winter. It is on everyone's breath and in everyone's overcoat. It has seeped into the baize cloth of everyone's parlour. It has insinuated itself into the brickwork of every privy, coagulated in alleys, hung in unpeopled corners and conserved its virtues, waiting for the day when it might come at last to the High City. This evening, like an invisible army, it filtered by stages along the Boulevard Aussman, where it woke the caged rabbits in the bakers'back yards and caused the chained dogs to whimper with excitement; flowed about the base of the hill at Alves, investing the derelict observatory with an extraordinary new significance; and passed finally to the heights of Minnet-Saba, where it gathered in waves to begin its stealthy assault on the High Noses. On the way it informed some strange crannies: inundating for instance a little-used arm of the pleasure canal at Lowth, where its spirit infected incidentally a curious tragedy on the ice.

The air was bitter inside the nose, the sky as black as anthracite. The Name Stars glittered cynically, commemorating some best-forgotten king. Down below on the frozen canal a grubby satin booth was pitched, its yellow shutters up, its cressets cold. From its door a long-legged brazier, kept fed with frigid horse dung, looked out like a red eye. In it, under the zodiacal representations and the testimonials to its proprietor's efficacy, a poet and a for tune teller sat, cheating one another feverishly at 'blind Michael'.

The poet was a rag of a man, little, and hollow-cheeked from a life of squalor, with his bright red hair stuck up on his head like a wattle and greed lurking in the corners of his grin. He gave his small hands no rest – when he was not trying to palm cards or filch the bottle, he was flapping them about like a wooden puppet's. At slow moments during the play he would stare silently into the air with his face empty and his mouth slack; then, catching himself, leap up from the three-legged stool on which he sat and go jigging round the booth until by laughing and extemporizing he had got his humour back. In mirth, or delivering doggerel, his voice had a penetrating hysterical timbre, like a knife scraped desperately on a plate. He had made a 'ballade of stewed cabbage'earlier that evening, but seemed to hate and fear the smell of the stuff, grimacing with dilated nostrils and turned-down mouth when a wave of it passed through the booth. His name was Ansel Verdigris, and the fat woman across the card table was his last resort.

Fat Main Etteilla with her aching ankles and her fatal cough, known to be the wisest woman in the Low City: yet she paid the poet's debts; admired his verses without in the least understanding them; and, though he gave her nothing in return for it, forgave both his perversions and his frequent distempers. All is made possible in the shadow of the *Dark Man.* On his calmer days Verdigris sat on her knee and ventriloquized her customers. When his nerves were bad, and he drove them away by spewing on the cards, she slapped his head. He made her laugh. She feared death, but he feared everything: and the closer to death she came the better she looked after him. One of her great soft hands made three of his! They were an odd pair to be keeping the night alive like that down on the deserted pleasure canal while worthier people slept. There was a cemetery behind the booth, and Verdigris could not keep his eyes off it.

At midnight he scratched his armpits and parted for the hundredth time the grubby satin curtains. The gravestones seemed to stretch back indefinitely under the moonlight. Where they ceased the Artists'Quarter began, its piebald roofs hanging on the dark skyline like an evil conundrum. Up the slope went his eyes, through the graves and into the city; back again. 'You sleep well enough out there!'he jeered, and then said a name the fortune teller could not catch. His narrow angular shoulders shuddered convulsively. She called him back but he hardly heard. He had not slept well himself since the night he murdered Galen Hornwrack. It was a yellow night, that one, grimed into his raddled brain and smelling of that unspeakable bundle with its rotting eyes. Ever since, he had had a feeling of being followed around. 'Someone walked over my grave,'he said. He laughed. 'Well I'll not mourn!'The moonlight flooding past

him into the booth was of a peculiar cast: in it, as we shall soon see, things seemed almost more solid than they did in broad daylight. 'They sleep well enough out there on All Men's Heath,'he said, and made to draw the satin closed.

Instantly the reek of stewed cabbage redoubled, rooting him to the spot. A lethal claustrophobia overcame him. 'Hornwrack!'he shrieked. He spun round, blundered past the fortune teller (who had got laboriously to her feet and spread her arms in an elephantine gesture of comfort), and tumbled out on to the ice, where his feet slipped from under him. In an attempt to keep his balance he grabbed the brazier by one of its iron legs. This only served to upset it over him. Squealing with pain and fear he slid out of the light, plucking feverishly at the glowing embers in his clothing.

The Fat Main was used to his convulsions. Grumbling hardly at all she righted the table. Queer little scenes glowed up at her from the scattered cards, ancient hieratic conjunctions of tower and insect stimulating her to worn prophecies. A good marriage, she thought, and a bad one: and there a blond-haired man. (Each card was like a small bright doorway at the end of a corridor. She was perhaps too old now to step through and be enshrined in pasteboard with a hermit crab and a flight of swans.) On her way to the back of the booth to see what had upset him this time she stopped to turn one card at random; stare at it for a moment, panting; and nod heavily to herself. Then she parted the curtains and looked out.

For a month or more, agents and emmissaries of the Sign of the Locust – now grown massively in power though its outlook became daily more esoteric, and seeking revenge for (among other things) the bloody confrontation in the Bistro Californium – had sought Ansel Verdigris through the warrens of the Low City. They were oblique but patient. Every clue had pointed to the pleasure canal. Now, their gait curious in the extreme, they raced silently down the slope of All Men's Heath toward the quivering Main. They were wrapped in rags and bandaged about their peculiarly misshapen heads, and as they hopped high in the air over the graves their arms flew out at odd angles and their knives were white in the moonlight.

Verdigris, with one short anticipatory gurgle, squirmed further into the shadowy undergrowth on the far bank of the canal…

Soon after they had entered it the booth began to agitate itself in a violent and eccentric fashion, lifting its skirts and tottering from side to side as if it was trying to remember how to walk – while out of it came a steady rhythmical thumping sound, like two or three axes hitting a wet log. A dreadful astonished wail rose up in accompaniment to this, modulating with each blow. Verdigris bit his lips and drew back further into the weeds. He put his hands over his

ears, but this changed nothing. The knives of the Sign rose and fell regularly; and the booth, like some remarkable engine in the night, continued to propel itself with an uncertain shuffling motion this way and that across the ice. After a little while, having reached the centre of the canal (where only lately it had been all boiled chestnuts and skating anemone-boys), it collapsed. Amorphous figures struggled momentarily beneath it; then it gave them up and they poured away through the cemetery in a quiet tattered wave, like the shadow of a cloud crossing a stony field. The booth gurgled and was still. It had somehow become tangled in the legs of the spilt brazier. Fire licked, reluctantly at first, at its grubby skirts. Then it was engulfed in a sudden silent rush of flames.

Ansel Verdigris stood on the ice in the unsteady yellow glow. He drew his knife and, in an access of some emotion he did not quite recognize, went off shouting up the hill and was ambushed and killed among the gravestones.

Not far away from All Men's Heath in the sharp and cabbagey night, Tomb the Dwarf kicked at his pony. His feet were cold. He had recently entered the City through the Gate ofNigg after three or four weeks in the deep wastes with Cellur the Bird Lord. Adventures and privations had attended him there, as they always did: old lizards following his steps, blinking at night in the small light of the fire; the pony quagged perpetually to its elbows in seepage hollows; and a great bird, first hanging high up in the air above them then settling nervously on a rock to inspect them from intelligent puzzled eyes, every feather made of metal! He had a friend buried in every acre of the North – knights of the Methven, sour old prospectors, all the thieves and princes who had traipsed with him at one time or another the useless places of the Empire. They had followed him too, as night drew in across the old battlefields of the Great Brown Waste.

The season now teetered on the cold iron pivot of the solstice, and Viriconium was asleep for once, huddled against the cold; you could hear its catarrhal snores from upper windows. The mosaic of its roofs, whited by moonlight and last week's frozen snow, lay like the demonstration of some equivocal new geometry. The Low City had retreated from him even as he entered it (dogs shivering outside the gatehouse, no other sign of life; the tunnel smelling of pee, black ice and that merciless vegetable), so that he seemed always to view it at a distance. He did not understand its mood. A muted expectancy, a cold glamour resistant to his dwarfish intuition, vibrated in its surfaces: he had for a moment (it was a moment only) a sense of *two* cities, overlapping in a sprawl of moonlit triangles and tangled thoroughfares. This conceit caused him to smile but remained with him nevertheless, quite distinctly, as if he had seen the future as a

composite city uninhabited by human beings.

More beggars were abroad than a single city had a right to, moving quietly about in ones and twos, the deformities that would by day be displayed up on Chamomile Street outside the pot-house doors, now half-hidden, under scalloped rags and strange tight bandages – as if when left to themselves they sought a finer aesthetic of suffering, and a subtler performance of it. Tomb stood up in his stirrups to see over the parapet of a bridge. *(Toc toc* went the pony's hooves, little and sharp on the cobbles.) 'Someone at least is keeping the night alive,'he observed. Underneath him the Pleasure Canal diminished toward Lowth in an icy curve, its surface tricked out with dim reflections of the Moon. 'The ice is miraculously hard. They've lit a brazier down there on it.'Cellur, though, seemed preoccupied. 'Now it's spilt!'Faint shouts and wails, as of laughter, floated up. 'Look here, Cellur – some fool's set fire to a conjuror's booth!'

'I see nothing.'

'You wish to see nothing. You are a dreary companion, I can tell you that. It's all gone dark now anyway,'said the dwarf disappointedly. He craned his neck. Nothing. His pony drifted to a standstill. When he caught up again the old man was hemming and clucking nervously.

'Those alms-men are following us now. Be ready with your axe. I do not believe they are what they seem.'

'Arms-men! Bloody beggars, more like.'He shifted the axe from one shoulder to the other. 'Black piss!'He had looked back and got a glimpse of the beggars hopping after him, soft-boned and ricketty-kneed, their arms flying out this way and that for balance. It was a horrible sight. 'There are not that many beggars in the entire world!'They were all humps and goitres. Their mis-shapen heads were concealed under crusty swathes of muslin and hats with ragged brims. Up in the Artists'Quarter and all around the derelict observatory at Alves they were gathering in large groups, lurching crazily about in white-breathed circles, watching idly as Tomb and Cellur rode past, joining the quiet procession behind. An occasional soft groan came from amongst them. Cellur's horse slithered and stumbled from rut to frozen rut; and though the pony was surer-footed they still went slowly up the Rivelin Hill between the shuttered booths and empty taverns.

Into the High City they went, but it proved to be no sanctuary. When they quickened their pace, the beggars. quickened theirs, breaking into the parody of a run. Through the elegant deserted plazas ofMinnet-Saba (where the road is made of something that muffles the sound of hooves and the wind has mumbled puzzledly for millenia round the upper peculiarities of the Pastel Towers) they poured, and out on to the great exposed spiral of the Proton Circuit: reeling from

side to side, jumping and hopping and tripping themselves up, always out of the power-axe's reach:

maintaining a zone ofquarantine about the old man and the dwarf, sweeping them along by the mere promise of contact. Tomb bit his lip and belaboured the pony's sides. All around him was a sort of dumb rustling noise, punctuated by the gasps and quiet desperate groans of the deformed. (Above and behind that he thought he heard a parched whisper, as if some enormous insect hovered above the chase on huge thoughtful wings.)

Ahead, lights glimmered. In the gusty winds at the summit of the spiral, the overlapping filigree shells of the palace creaked as if they were part of some flimsier structure. Methven's hall: the Moon hung above it like a daubed head. 'Look!'For a moment its image wavered – two palaces were superimposed, behind it another landscape showed through. Blue particles showered from its upper regions, a rain of tiny luminous insects. They galloped toward it nevertheless. Where else could they go? It trembled like a dragonfly's wing; was refracted like something seen through running water on a sunny day; and accepted them almost reluctantly. New Palace Yard was almost deserted. Tomb's caravan still stood there, its shafts empty and its colours dimmed by the smoke of winter. No guards were there to observe the sparks fly up from the pony's hooves or watch the dwarf- axe in hand and white hair streaming out behind

– tumble to the ground and hurl himself back through the gate they had just come through, determined to hold it at all costs.

The beggars, though, had forgotten about him the moment he entered the palace, and now idled about outside, staring blankly at one another. They were not beggars, he saw: they were bakers and greengrocers, in the remnants of striped aprons; they were dukes and moneylenders: they were butchers. The Sign of the Locust peeped through their curious rags. They stood in the bluish moonlight and they seemed to be waiting for something; he couldn't tell what. (They no longer had any reasons for the things they did, but he wasn't to know that. A white and single instinct had them now, like a thin song in the brain.) He watched them for five or six minutes, feeling the sweat dry on him as the seconds stretched uneventfully out and his body relaxed. Cellur came up behind him and looked over his head. 'You can put up the axe,'he said with a certain morose satisfaction. 'The City is theirs, High and Low.'And he strode rapidly off into the outer corridors, heading for the throne-room. Tomb backed away from the gate with a half-hearted snarl and, stopping to collect the bundle of long silver rods he had carried behind his saddle to the Agdon Roches and back, followed him.

The corridors were full of rubbish, mounds of decaying vegetables

and heaps of ashes. Everywhere were the discarded uniforms of the palace guard. Much of the food was spoiled, half-eaten, as if whoever had prepared it was unused to human provisions; or had forgotten what to do with them. Cellur shook his head.

'They have let us in,'he said: 'But they will not let us out again so easily. I wonder what they are waiting for.'

(Methvet Nian, Queen Jane, waited also, in a cold room with five false windows. It had been a long time to wait at the heart of emptiness, nothing human moving in the corridors outside.)

Elsewhere, three figures cross our field of vision like the vanguard of an as-yet-distant refugee column. The deep wastes of Fenlen roll away from them in the weak, variable light of late afternoon, hollow as a fevered cheek. Their faces are haggard but human. They walk – if walk is the word for this slithering, staggering progress through the mud – heads down into the rain and some yards apart. They rarely speak to one another. Madness and pain have divided them and they will not now be brought back together. All day long they have followed a fourth figure (there! – bobbing in the saturated air above them, like some great inflated spectral frog!) through a belt ofderelict factories. Often they halt and stare anxiously about, in case this floating guide has abandoned them: for they are forty days out from the wreckage of Iron Chine, and they have almost forgotten who they are. The moor ahead of them is scattered with interlacing ashpits, chancred with shallow albescent tarns, and strewn as far as the eye can see with broken earthenware pipes – the detritus, it may be, of some ancient ill-fated reclamation project. From the continental marshes and sumps to the north, the wind brings a deadly metallic reek; and mixed with that more often than not comes the faint smell of lemons, to usher in another period of delirium.

The woman imagines she is the spokesman of some alien race. Her cropped hair is daubed with mud, and she makes complicated motions of the fingers to symbolize the actions of wings or antennae. She speaks of a city on the plain. 'We lid not wish to come here,'she says reasonably, 'this is not our place!'There is a cold-sore at the corner of her mouth. For the last half-hour her gait had grown steadily more disconnected. 'Your breath burns us!'she exclaims with a light laugh, as if stating some principle so obvious as to need no demonstration; and she collapses into the mud. Her limbs move feebly then stop. Broken pipes are dislodged and roll down on to her. Her companions continue their ascent of the low ridge before them. At last one of them looks back.

'Fulthor,'he says dully, 'she can't go any further unaided;'and the other replies, 'I see the great-breasted chimerae with their ironic eyes, but I cannot go to them! This morning early I had a vision of Arnac

san Tehn – him with the head like a god – sitting in a garden.'

He strikes himself repeatedly about the face and head. 'Dust and hyacinths in my father's library; dust and hyacinths my proud inheritance!'This litany seems to give him doubtful comfort. For some time he runs in erratic circles in the mud, his neck bent and his face pulled over to one side of his skull as if he has suffered a stroke. Eventually he joins the first figure (who has sat down wearily to watch him) and with much fumbling they raise the woman by her legs and shoulders. Their farting guide, meanwhile, hectors them in a language not heard on Earth before or since. He waves a fat, admonitory hand and they must follow; slower than before, up the dip of the long low ridge, sliding into peat groughs and shallow hidden pools, their eyes on their feet and the woman slung between them like a rotting hammock… Imagine that our field of vision is static, and that they have almost moved out of it, creeping across from left to right as the light fades. They crest the ridge. We see only their uncomprehending faces, made tiny and grey by distance; while they see only the city which spreads itself suddenly below them like excavations in a sunken garden.

A mist drifts over the scene – particulate, sullen, smelling of lemons.

The throne-room at Viriconium, on a cold and desultory afternoon three or four days after the death of the Fat Main:

three o'clock, and the night was already closing in, diffusing through the draughty passages where the old machines muttered and drew about themselves their meagre shawls of light. Methvet Nian: nine steel rings glittered cold and grey on her thin stiff fingers. She wore a cloak made from white fur clasped with amber and iron, and took her chocolate from a rare grey china cup. Her eyes were purple and depthless. Cellur the birdmaker sat with her, leaning forward a little, his face beaky and hollow in the weak light admitted by the clerestory windows high above. Their murmurs echoed in the chilly air. 'We know nothing but that the world is invaded."Our fate in St Elmo Buffin's hands.'

'Nothing seen from the outer wall."Great insects, marching south. The Queen held out one hand, palm flat, to the small blue flames of the fire, feeling an uncertain, transitory w armth.

Around them the palace was quiet, though not unpopulated. The Queen's guard had, it turned out, destroyed

some weeks before in a series of bloody, motiveless purges and episodic defections to the Sign of the Locust: the day after his arrival, Tomb the Dwarf had brought his caravan in from the courtyard, established himself like a nomadic warlord somewhere in the littered outer corridors, and taken charge of the handful of disorientated

survivors he found living rough in the guardrooms and abandoned mess halls. It was a situation which suited both his inclinations and his experience. At night the dull ring of his hammer penetrated the intervening walls; he was rearming his little force. During the morning he made the round of his defences – which consisted mainly in barricades constructed from old machinery – or stared from the judas-hole he had contrived in the main gates at the silent 'beggars'without. In the afternoons he would knock on the throne-room door and allow Methvet Nian to serve him lukewarm chamomile which he compounded with a violent brandy from Cladich. I expect an attack soon,'he would report, and another day would pass without event. 'It can't be long in coming.'He was happier, he explained, with something to do. Never-theless he dreamed a lot, of the lost excitements of his youth.

Leaving the palace for the city was like entering a dark crystal (especially at night, under the 'white pulpy spectre'the Moon); the shape of things became irregular, refracted; sudden astonishing mirages swallowed the Pastel Towers or engulfed the denizens of the streets beneath them. It was as if Viriconium (the physical city, that is, the millenial artifact which sums up a thousand dead cultures) had suffered some sort of psychic storm, and forgotten itself. Its very molecules seemed to be creeping apart. 'As you walk,'the dwarf tried to explain after a single clandestine excursion to the Artists'Quarter, 'the streets create themselves around you. When you have passed everything slips immediately back into chaos again.'Many of the Reborn had abandoned their houses in Minnet-Saba and were making their way north, a trickle of great horses, big-wheeled carts and vibrantly coloured armour: they carried their strange weapons with care. Down in the Low City the alleys were empty and stuporous – no-one was coming out except for coke or cabbage. Outside the palace waited the devotees of the Sign, becoming more mis-shapen beneath their cloaks and bandages every day…

In the room at the centre of the palace the light had almost gone. Draughts ran about like mice in the corners. White stiff fingers retreated beneath the fur cloak she clasped about her: 'It is so cold this afternoon. On the Rannoch Moor when I was little more than a child, Lord Birkin Grif killed a snow-leopard. It was not so cold then. He spun me round by the arms crying “Hold on, hold tight!” (That was earlier still.) The dwarf is late this afternoon.'

'It isn't yet four. He never comes sooner than four.'

'He seems late this afternoon.'

As the clerestory dimmed, weighting the upper air with shadows, and the chocolate cooled in its china cups, the flames in the hearth achieved a transitory, phthisic prominence; and, one by one, like the

compartments of a dream, the five false windows of the throne-room were filled with a grey and tremulous glow. Against this fitful illumination moved the silhouettes ofCellur and the Queen, nodding murmurous figures of a shadow play. The bird lord's success in controlling the windows – through which it was possible to see sometimes long lines of insects moving across an unknown terrain – had.been only partial. He could turn them neither on nor off. And though three out of five of them could lately be compelled to show some recognizable part of the Empire, how these views were selected was not clear to him. Since coming here he had sought:

Contact with his own machines beneath the estuary at Lendalfoot;

Views of St Elmo Buffin's fleet;

Some intimation of the circumstances in which Horn-wrack and his charges now found themselves.

Luck had not been with him. This was now to change, but not in a way he could have foreseen.

The windows were arranged in a high narrow bay which resembled the stern lights of an old ship. The glow in them grew gelid and shifty. In the third pane from the left (for two hundred years prior to Methven's reign it had depicted the same view, becoming known as the 'Pane ofiars'and giving rise to a common proverb) it condensed into three or four muculent lumps, drifting like fish in a polluted tank. After a moment this activity had spread to the four other panes, and a further refining or condensation had revealed the lumps to. be the salient features of five deformed heads – or five images of the same head (two of them upside down). The head was in pain. A dark rubbery device had been forced over its nose and mouth. The straps securing this gag or mask cut deeply into the plump flesh of its cheeks, which was of a mouldy, greenish-white colour patched with silvery acne. Whether the expressions that contorted the visible features reflected hope or fatalism, anger or panic, it was impossible to tell. Its yes, though watery, were urgent.

For some minutes this apparition struggled silent and unnoticed behind the glass as though trying to escape into the throne-room. A psychic gulf of such vastness separated spectre from substance that it seemed to be maintained in

focus only by its own desperation; by some debilitating and debasing act ofwill. It could see Cellur and the Queen and it was trying to speak. Eventually it whispered a little, a syllable like a trickle of vomit in a voice quite at odds with the amount of effort needed to produce it.

Gorb, it said.

Its eyes widened triumphantly. *Gorb.* Cellur and the Queen murmured on. The cups clinked, the day darkened and slipped

inevitably into night; thin blue flames danced in the hearth, leaving delicate indelible images on the surface of the eye.

Gorb.

The head flung itself about, its hidden mouth gaping, until

'GORB!'

fell into the room like a corpse.

The windows flickered dementedly, shuffling views of the head like Fat Mam Etteilla shuffling the trumps. Cellur jumped to his feet, his cloak knocking the china on to the floor. 'It sees us! At last the windows have come to their full function!'(This was a guess: he was still in the dark.) Five panes showed the awful mutated face of the ancient airboatman – left profile, right threequarter profile. They showed sudden random close-ups of individual features – an ear, an eye, the mask with its proliferating tubes and cillia. Pentadic, huge, it winked down into the throne-room. 'Is it the man from the Moon?"Speak!'

Speak?.

All this time he has been struggling to speak!

Now at last he masters the language – Benedict Paucemanly with his message from a white and distant planet:

'Gorb,'he said. *'Fonderia diferro in Venezia* … mi god guy… non-articulated constituent elements… Here lie I in the shadows of the veinous manna, burrowed into the absolute ABRACADAVER of the Earth… Earth! – all things are one to the Earth… mi god guy im all swole up… *Fear deat hftom the air!'*

He giggled weakly and shook his head. 'It's simpler than that.'He tried again. 'In the Time of Bone, in the Time of Dreams, when, on the far side of the Moon. I lay like a cheese, blue-veined and with a loop of blue wire for a brain… No. Simpler than that, too -'Look, as a young man I flew to the Moon. I would not do such a thing now. Something happened to me there, some transformation peculiar to the airs of that sad planet, and I fell asleep. I fell into a rigor, sank without trace into a trance in which I perceived for a hundred years the singing latticework of my own brain. It was a gift, do you see, or a punishment. (I no longer care which, though the question perplexed me then for its metaphysical implications if nothing else.) There, I was no longer a man at all but a theory, I was a thought received with the clarity of a sensation – hard, complex, resonant with proof. I was a crystal-set, and I thought that I could hear the stars.

'I lay on a marble slab in a paved garden among formal perspectives, my naked body citronised by the light falling down from space. At my side a single rose grew like an alum cyst on a long stem. Sometimes it emitted a quiet but intolerably beautiful melody comprising four or five notes on a vanished musical scale. The frozen

air filled my mouth. I soon forgot my ship, the *Saucy Sal.* I communicated with the spare, bony winds of that region, blowing in from between the stars. The Moon is a strange place. Up there, shadows fall motionless and subtly awry. It is a nexus. It was changed by many races who tried to come to Earth (or to leave it) during the long downfall of the Afternoon Cultures. It is a listening ear. It is an outpost.'

In the throne-room hearth the small blue flames were exchanged mysteriously for a heap of orange embers. Dark seeped in through the clerestory windows. The dwarf did not come. Outside, the evening wind had brought more snow into the numbed city, hurrying it along as a guide hurries tourists down the picturesque but dangerous streets of some revolution-torn capital. (Streets that would turn later into black and silver geometrical proofs under the sovereign influence of the moonlight.) Benedict Paucemanly whispered like the waves on a distant beach, sometimes audible, sometimes not. He suffered frequent bouts of aphasia. Obscenities, mingled with a dubious lyricism, still made up much of his vocabulary. He still confused the grammar of a dozen old languages with that of a score of invented ones. But the backbone of his monologue was comprehensible. Cellur and the Queen, hypnotised by his awful pentadic image, listened to it and later reported it:

'The Moon, or some secret relic of the Afternoon which still inhabits it, had captured the aviator on his arrival and made him into a sort of ear by which to listen to the populated universe (though “listen” is perhaps not the word to use). This, we learnt from him, had been a common practice at one time. He was paralysed and placed on a slab. Messages poured through him like a clear fluid. Around him rows of other slabs diminished into the distance, and on them he could see the empty shells of other “ears” abandoned millenia ago when their long sleep turned finally into death. Many of the bodies were broken; they were like hollow porcelain figurines. He found himself able to eavesdrop on the transmissions passing through him, but it was like eavesdropping on Babel. The material universe, it would appear, has little absolute substance. It hardly exists. It is a rag of matter, a wisp of gas, a memory of some former state. Each sentient species perceives the thin evidence of this state in a different way, generating out of this perception its physical and metaphysical *Umwelt:* its little bubble or envelope of “reality”. These perceptual systems are hermetic and admit of no alternative. They are the product of a particular set of sense-organs, evolutionary beginnings and planetary origins. If the cat were to define the world, he would exclude the world of the housefly in his mouth. Each species has its fiction, and that fiction is to all intents and purposes real; and the

actual thin substance of the universe becomes more and more debatable, oneiric, hard to achieve, like the white figures that will not focus at the edge of vision…

'Ten thousand sentient races populate the stars. All their mad jargons lace the aether. Paucemanly listened, but was unable to answer them. “All were distant, dreadfully distant. Their voices were a fading, incomprehensible whisper; a sickening rumour of otherness.” Thus he lay there on his catafalque: far enough from the human *Umwelt* to perceive the myriad realities of the cosmos; not far enough to be able to forget his own humanity. This state persisted for a hundred years or a little less, until new, strong transmissions invaded local space.

'At first, new voices sang to him. This was the first feathery touch of their spiritual envelope or atmosphere. Latterly, he saw them, as a great filmy wing stretched across the cruel lunar meridian. Closer, they were a vast wave. He was soon inundated, sodden with their new “reality”. All other transmissions ceased. The rose which had bloomed beside his slab shattered with a sound of unearthly grief. A fine tracery of cracks appeared in the slab itself. The white gardens fell to dust around him. He was free. In that moment he lost his humanity for good. (But could not as yet attain any other form. The flesh has an inertia.) His.broadcasts to the Earth were begun too late: by then, the tenuous wave-fronts of the new consciousness had brushed the Pastel City, and in its gutters and alleyways and great Houses was conceived the “Sign of the Locust” – immaculate and ravishing, a philosophy like a single drop of poison at the centre of a curved mirror, an imperfect intuition of the alien *Umwelt* and of its implications for our own; the first infection of the human reality!

'They were insects long ago. They need no vehicles, but slip like a swarm of locusts down the faults and cleavage zones of space (which they conceive of as an extensive empty wasteland littered with the stony rubbish of planets and echoing with their own dry stridulations). Their motives are unclear: instinct – or something resembling it – compels them to search the continuum endlessly for some solution they cannot even define to themselves. Now, that cold passion is in ruins, and they are trying to live on the Earth. They were never meant to come down here and build a city. It is their tragedy as much as ours.

'This was how the great aviator put it to us. Out of confusion he had offered to lead them to the Earth. (Who can blame him? – woken from apparent death on the far side of the Moon, he had found himself neither insect nor human nor anything he had once been! They were all he had to cling to.) Out of a greater confusion they had followed him. Now – totem or deity or mere interpreter – he was encysted at

the heart of their new city, passing his immobile hours in the blue mosaic flicker of his half insectile dreams, involuntary amplifier of the swarm's *Umwelt.*

"'Already it is too late for human consciousness ever to fully repossess the World; the new dream pours out like mist to envelope and mutate it." Yet the swarm had been contaminated in its turn: "Where once it boasted the horny membranes of the locust, the mantis or the wasp, now it imagines flesh, skin, hair. It regards itself with horror. It is losing the struggle to maintain its inner vision, its hermetic certainty in the face of the void.'

'In the grip of this perceptual stalemate the very substance of the planet had begun to fade, stretch and tear, like an old net curtain at a window in the Boulevard Auss-man. If it continued, the conflict between Man and Insect would become nothing more than a jumble of meaningless shadowy events pivoting round a decaying point in space and time. In areas of major confrontation, matter, in its attempts to accommodate both "realities", was already distorting, drifting into new forms and miscegenations. New ranges of mountains had appeared in the north; coastlines had taken on new forms, plastic, curious, undependable, draped with a new vegetation which had come up out of the sea along the flight-paths of the insects and now assumed a grey, etiolated, mucoid transparency; vast hallucinatory displays filled the skies at night, great shifting modular curtains like the view from a mosaic eye. All this had been added to the minor symptoms already observed, the Sign of the Locust, the rains of lights. In addition, the conflict of two dreams had woken older dreams: the factories of the Afternoon rebuilt themselves fragmentarily in the Great Wastes, producing clouds of corrosive vapour; strangely-dressed figures speaking ancient languages were posturing in the streets of Lendalfoot and Duirinish.

"'The World," whispered Benedict Paucemanly, "is desperately trying to remember itself… blork… *nomadacris septemfasciata!*. .. what a lovely bit of meat…

Embers settled in the hearth. The doors of the throne-room rattled suddenly, their brass motifs of coelacanths and mermen shifting uneasily in the bluish gloom, and were still. It was the wind, perhaps; or perhaps something had fallen against them. From the passage outside was heard briefly an indistinct groaning; a dull clamour far off; silence. Something was happening out there, but those within were captivated by the wavering pentadic spectre of the old airman, his voice faint and his flesh tortured by the mask which, he explained, was now his sole means of perceiving the 'real', the human world. Methvet Nian said nothing, but only watched in horror and compassion the nodding of that wounded, debased head; and gently

shook her own, while Cellur the birdmaker tugged his robe tighter round his thin chest and shivered. His head ached with the cold, and with the effort of following that faded cloacal whisper. He had recognized in the spectre's antics a certain self-consciousness. There was an archness in its winks and gross nods; the narcissism of the confessional informed its breakings of wind.

'What must we do, then?'he asked, a little impatiently.

Paucemanly gave a loud belch. His image swam, retreated, and was replaced by something quite new: great dragonflies, jewelled and crippled, dragged themselves across the shivering panes while behind them the landscape heaved and humped itself into shapes nascent and organic. 'They mutate and die in the new vapours of Earth: but their breeding cells are full.'Wingless and melting, the insects were swallowed by the curious hills about them. These in turn folded back to reveal a face, brown and bony-looking like the stripped and varnished skull of a horse into which had been inserted two half-pomegranates for eyes. It stared into the throne-room. 'Oops,'it said. 'Green, brown, testing. Hello?'Paucemanly reappeared in a glutinous yellow fog, looking puzzled. 'Whatever emerges from them,'he went on, 'will wrest the world to its own purposes… testing…

Septemfasciata ….'A high fluting sound came out of the windows. One of them shattered. Glass fell into the room. Nothing was revealed except a dusty hole which later proved to contain only some gold filaments and a few small bones. (Cellur, though, winced away as if he expected some alien limb to reach out of it.)

In the remaining panes a tarry smoke obscured intermittently the greenish image of the airman. A clump of fat sinister fingers – his own – appeared, feeling their way over his face as if trying to remember it from some previous encounter. They rested thoughtfully on the mask; then with a quick, predatory motion clutched it by the straps and tugged it oW Vomit sprayed from the defaced features beneath. Paucemanly vanished instantly.

'Is the world ending, then?'asked Cellur.

'I want only death,'came the answer, a distant whisper clogged with self-pity and guilt. 'A hundred years in the Moon! Only death.'

In the windows appeared a series of faded pictures of ordinary insects, the dry husks ofwasps crushed underfoot in an attic long ago, and hawkmoths like flower-pressings in an old book. A wind stirred them. They darkened one by one until there was nothing left at all. Cellur stood for a long time in the gloom, thinking of nothing. He could not make himself say anything to the Queen.

The dwarf came in with his axe in one hand and a bundle of thin shiny steel rods in the other. He was out of breath and there was blood in his hair. He drank his lukewarm chamomile with a grimace.

When he noticed the dark windows and broken glass he nodded grimly. 'They had the signal to pass the gates half an hour ago,'he said. 'We're done for in here.'

He dropped the steel rods on the floor and, with a packet of tools he took from under his jerkin, set about assembling them. It was quick work. Soon he had in front of him a half-human skeleton ten or eleven feet tall – his famous 'mechanical wife', grubbed up long ago from some frigid desert in the far North. It was quiet in the room as he coupled its metal bones. Nevertheless he paused every so often to tilt his head on one side and listen; and at one point said casually: 'Someone will have to bolt the doors. I can't reach them, and the lads out there won't last much longer.'(Cellur did not answer. Little motes of blue light like luminous beetles had begun to spill from the shattered window. They fell faster and faster, like rain. They filled the room with a queer glow which lit the white cheek of Methvet Nian as she sat staring silently at nothing.)

A distant shout filtered through from the beleagured outer corridors. The whole palace seemed to shudder. The dwarf scratched his head. After a long life his understanding of such situations was preternatural. Steel scraped on steel, on stone, as he hurriedly spread the mechanical wife on the floor so that its legs stuck straight out and its arms were set close to its sides. He did something to it until it hummed and sent up motes of its own. Then he lowered himself down so that he lay limb for limb on its cold bones. A harness fastened his upper body into its flaring ribcage; its jawless skull he hinged forward to fit over his head like a helmet. 'It is my cold companion, that I thought I would never embrace again,'he murmured. Certain levers enabled him to control it, but for the moment he lay still in the curious blue light, performing some act of memory. Ozone, and a low buzzing, filled the air. The skeleton snapped its fingers inadroitly. It shivered and stretched, and of its own accord made grasping motions; but when he moved the levers at last, it failed to respond.

Something threw itself with a crash against the throne-room doors.

The dwarf was stuck in the harness. He writhed about. 'Bolt the doors one of you, or it's the end of us!'He got free and addressed himself feverishly to the machine. Sparks came up from it; it gave up slow yellow fireflies to join the flow of blue light from the broken window. A smell like burnt horsehair filled the air. As for Cellur and the Queen:

neither of them seemed to be able to move. Their faces were waxy with despair, their eyes like lemurs'. For Tomb it was only a physical disaster, it was only another war; for them it was a disaster of *meaning*. They murmured in low, slurred voices to one another, like

old intelligent animals – 'Saint Elmo Buffin'; 'a fatal chance'. Tomb broke his nails on the ancient machinery. He was a dwarf not a philosopher; it was just another war: and he thought he still had time to win it…

He strapped himself back into the harness. The mechanical wife lifted itself from the flagstones with a groan and an ungainly lurch, like an overloaded camel. It was worn out, like all the other machinery in Viriconium. No-one knew what it had been used for all those centuries ago in the doomed Afternoon Kingdoms. It flailed clumsily about, smashing pieces of furniture in its efforts to stay upright. It fumbled on the floor until it came up with the dwarf's power-axe, which it proceeded to swing in dangerous, humming arcs. 'Ha ha,'laughed the dwarf. He pulled the skull-piece down over his head. His old eyes blinked redly. He felt alive. He only had to stamp his feet and the walls shook. He moved his levers. Trailing creamy white motes like cabbage moths, the mechanical wife shambled over to the doors, one enormous hand reaching triumphantly for the upper bolts…

Outside in a victorious gloom, the remnants of the palace guard bubbling to death at their feet, were gathered the devotees of the Sign. Since the murder on the Pleasure Canal they had lost touch with their ruling echelon in the fluorescing windy mazes of the Artists'Quarter; their ideological priorities had become unfathomable, even to themselves; and their very flesh had suffered violent and useless evolutions. In their endless quartering of the Low City they had uprooted railings, constructed wooden clubs studded with bits of broken glass, helped themselves to butchers'cleavers and old kitchen knives black with corrosion; gathering an army fit for the mutated, the motivationally-bankrupt and the burst. The pain of their transformation had caused them to loosen or unwind the bandages which had previously disguised their humps and tumours, and these now flapped about them in crusty strips as they hopped and sprang erratically along the palace corridors on their strong, bent legs.

Their eyes were puzzled and full of agony. They could not become insects. The flesh, ultimately, resists: there is a conservatism of cell and marrow. But they would never again be human – From wounds like women's lips had bloomed a fantastic, irrelevant anatomy: drooping feathery antennae, trembling multi-jointed legs, a thousand mosaic eyes, vibrating palps and purposeless plates of chitin. Where these new deformed organs merged into the original flesh was a transitional substance, pinkish grey, weeping like an unsuccessful graft. None of them were in the right place. From a mutilated torso sprang six thin legs, rattling like dry sticks in a wind. (They seemed to be beckoning. The man from whom they had grown screamed

involuntarily whenever he caught sight of himself.) Here rubbery, saw-edged mandibles had burst from flower-like lesions at knee or nape and were now speaking unknown languages in reedy, creaking voices, there a gristly membrane flapped like a mantle, dotted with the abortive stumps of wings. For the genitals of a magistrate from Alves had been substituted a coiled mothlike tongue. which poked out uncontrollably at intervals. Some of them leapt and sprang about unpredictably, like grasshoppers on a sunny day; others had lost completely the power of upright locomotion and dragged themselves round in circles like crippled blowflies. This degradation was not wholly their own: behind the desperate murmurs that escaped them could be sensed the rustling whisper of some crippled demiurge: the pain of the Idea striving to clothe itself.

Propelled by a black horror of their own state, dimly but bitterly aware of the humanity they had willingly discarded, they broke down the doors and bore the mechanical wife of Tomb the Dwarf back across the throne-room, beating at it with their old shovels and broken swords. Hung up there among its gleaming limbs he swung his axe; tottered; retreated. While behind him Cellur the birdmaker woke from a dream of dissolution and found it to be real.

10: All the Wounds of the Earth

Galen Hornwrack came down into the mysterious City like some legendary failed conquistador. (Fever and magic have defeated his skills. The waste lands he set out to cross in his youth have shown him no enemy but his own ambition. All wells were poisoned; sand has swallowed his troops and his hopes. He lurches back alone into the country of his birth only to find that it too has become shifting, unreliable, changed forever… *)* The scars left by his fight with the metal bird, an encounter which he recalled only dimly, had diverted and hardened the characteristic lines of his face, so that a strange asceticism now modified his habitual expression of petulance and seW-involvement. His nose was running. The sword of tegeus-Cromis he carried in his left hand, having lost its scabbard somewhere in the rotting landscapes behind him. His torn cloak revealed the mail the Queen had given him, now rusty. His eyes were empty and his gaze appallingly direct; as if, tiring of the attempt to winnow the real from the unreal, he now assigned exactly the same value to every object entering his visual field: as if he had suspended judgement on events, and now merely lived through them.

His desire to see the City had kept him from sleep.

Alstath Fulthor followed him, supporting the woman and her endless prophecies. A radiance, colourless in itself, issuing no doubt from his horned and lobed crustaceal armour, appeared to fill both their bodies, illuminating from beneath the things they wore, crimson and blue, as in some old painting. The alien presence of the City, its equivocal contract with 'reality', had lent new energy to – their madness. 'In my youth,'sang the woman, 'I made my small contribution. Blackpool and Chicago become as nothing, their receding colonnades echo to the sound of vanished orchestras.'At this they stopped to regard one another half in delight, half in horror, their cropped spiky hair and long restless hands giving them the air of children caught in some game of conspiracy. (It was only that they hoped to manipulate time, as we know: believing that by combination and recombination of a few common images – which are themselves only the symbols rather than the actual memories of acts peculiar to the Afternoon Cultures – they might obtain the 'code'which would liberate them from the Evening. Thus Main Etteilla, shuffling her pasteboard cards…)

They dawdled, and Hornwrack sat tiredly in the mud to wait for them.

'That's enough of that!'he said sharply. He treated them for the most part with a gruff indulgence, but tried to prevent their odd and

embarrassing sexual encounters, chasing the woman away with the flat of his sword while being careful to keep his eye on Fulthor's own great weapon.

'That's enough!'they mimicked. 'That's enough!'

He did not know why he was here, heading into the world's deep wound. Bankrupt of purpose when they had fetched him that morning from the rooms in the Rue Sepile, he had maintained himself on the energy of old betrayals and resentments, none of which had survived the journey through the Deep Wastes. He shrugged. He was a husk. Above him hung the torpid and corrupt manifestation of Benedict Paucemanly which was his only hope. Since dawn it had been undergoing a crisis of will, dissolving sporadically into a mass of greyish curds and losing the power of speech. It would reassemble itself slowly after such a bout, beckon Hornwrack on toward the City, belch tragically. 'I want only death,'it would explain. And Hornwrack with a sigh would lead his mad proteges a little closer.

This City had appeared on the plain with the descent of the insects a decade before, growing from the worn stone nubs, tilted columns and submerged pavements of an ancient Afternoon site. They had not so much built it as expected it. It was not so much a City as a response of ordinary matter to their instinctive metaphysical demands, the warping pressures of their 'new reality'. Originally it had consisted of a number of large but flimsy structures arranged without apparent thought on and around a low mound. The biggest of these were perhaps a hundred feet tall. They were like dry wasps'nests, and of the same papery, cellular construction. They rustled in the wind. The insects went leaping among them on curiously aimless pathways, along the sides of which had been built up over the years peculiar crystalline accretions, hanging reefs and tottering spires, galleries composed of crumbling metallic oxides veined with serpentines and alien glasses. Smaller structures had eventually grown up in the shadows of this development: partly-roofed eccentric hexagons formed of impacted sand mixed with certain bodily secretions of their inhabitants, who forced themselves in and out of small openings in the walls.

But if the insects had first begun to change the Earth at this spot, so it had begun to change them; and matter's accommodating plasticity had turned suddenly into a trap.

Gravity had imprisoned them: here they had first felt its pull, and lost the power of extra-atmospheric flight. It had suddenly become necessary for them to breathe, yet they could not breathe air, and must invent some substitute: here they had built the chugging machinery to disseminate it. (It never worked very well.) Fluids had been unknown to them during their frigid millennial migration

through the barren spaces: here they had first filled their tissues with them as a buffer against the poisons of Earth. Here they had put on their breathing masks and built their weapons, seeing themselves as beleaguered, unwilling colonists, victims of a cosmic accident: which they were. Here the human *Umwelt* had first penetrated their strange nervous systems, working a madness on them so that they could not understand what they saw or felt, and began to die of a new disease.

At the time Galen Hornwrack met his end here, all order and sense of purpose had vanished from the place. The buildings, alien to begin with, had begun to subside like hot glass, as if searching for a new centre of gravity. A partly transparent architecture of nightmarish balconies and over hanging walls had formed as Matter, struggling to find a compromise between human and insect demands, began to teeter and grope toward verticals and horizontals that satisfied neither. Streets laid down under no wholesome plan ended in pits, or in staircases which themselves petered out after a turn or two up the sides of some enormous windowless cylinder. The towers shuddered and quaked, vibrating between human and alien states; then slumped and dissolved like jelly. A languorous buzzing sound accompanied this process, and beneath that the clangour of enormous bells, as if matter were trying to toll itself apart. Appalling winds howled down the changing thoroughfares. Streams of tiny blue motes tumbled from the higher cornices; out in the open squares (through which, as in a dream, could be discerned the equivalent plazas of Viriconium – opposite pole, node of nightmares, sister city) struggled the changed individuals of the swarm; while among the alleys of this disintegrating province proliferated the thick, yellow stems of some mutated plant.

Above, vast clouds of the insects hung in the throbbing purple sky, making adventive, meaningless patterns as they attempted to replicate or restart the endless spatial pilgrimage. They hurled themselves into huge pits dug in the desert. They invented useless vehicles which rolled like mouldy grapefruit between the dunes, rising a few feet above the ground to emit foul gases. ('Regretfully,'whispered the madwoman, 'it is part of a scheme you cannot understand.') Into this chaos Galen Hornwrack was persuaded to lead his party, unaware that circumstances were about to return to him a fragment or two of his distant – indeed by now almost imaginary – adolescence.

Under a sky like a glass mantle, at an intersection in the disintegrating ground plan of the city, two insects performed a dance in the suicidal light. Disease had maimed them, their eyes were like rotting melons; yet vivid heraldic insignia flared along their blue and green flanks like the lights of deep-sea fishes. Stiff and quivering, with curled abdomens and spread wings, moving one damaged limb at a

time, they had the air of being painted on one of Elmo Buffin's sails, or tattoed in glowing inks on an upper arm. through this architecture of melting wax by small energetic movements of its finny hands.

Evening came, and with it a purple gloom through which darted curious flames.

Out of this, wreathed in a glutinous yellow fog, some clumsy insects dragged themselves. There were three or four of them. Alstath Fulthor put his hands to his head and fell down. 'Oh oh oh,'he cried. 'Oh, oh,'whispered the insects. They approached with a peculiar reluctance, dipping their great masks. Their grey wing-cases and armoured yellow underparts were cross-hatched with self-inflicted wounds. From these wounds were growing like buds a variety of pink new half-human limbs, joined to the pricked and rotting carapaces by a transitional substance, membranous, neither flesh nor chitin. There were clumps of little hands with mobile, perfect fingers, each one having a tiny fingernail like mother-of-pearl. There were the faces of very young children with closed eyes. There were eyes alone (as indeed there were legs and torsos and internal organs), gummy with post-natal sleep, and of a very distinct blue like enamelling on an old brooch. Some of the faces murmured drowsily.

Whether these insects were ambassadors or soldiers was not clear. They had recognised Hornwrack's party as human, and been attracted by the magistral lustre of the Reborn Man's scarlet armour. (When they approached him their own insignia flared up along their sides, orange and emerald.) They could not speak, though, and he could not help them. They remained: immobile, at once heraldic and debased. It was the madwoman who sat up suddenly to speak on their behalf.

'We did not ask to come here,'she said. She watched Hornwrack, who in his turn licked his lips and stared at the travesty of a baby's head.

'What?'he said.

'Go away and wait,'she begged. 'Leave us to be finished here. We cannot live here much.'She opened her mouth and blood trickled from her lacerated tongue. 'Give us in peace,'she whispered, holding her head on one side in a listening attitude, her mouth full of crushed flowers. 'Oh!'

At the end of this speech she was standing with her back to the insects, her eyes bright with a horrifying intelligence. Their own great faceted orbs observed Hornwrack calmly over her shoulders. They were motionless. Hornwrack began to back away, laughing. 'No more of this!'he heard himself exclaim. He held up his hands. 'I don't want to hear any more.'He looked round for guidance, but Fulthor was grunting on the floor, and the spectre of the ancient airman had inconveniently vanished. Suddenly a kind of fake anger overcame his

fright. He dragged the sword of tegeus-Cromis from his belt, shoved the woman aside, and waded into them with it. But it was only steel, and quickly broke in half. The ambassadors fell back without resisting him, rustling, bearing their dreadful human buds. (One of the heads woke up. *Leave us alone,* it whispered, looking directly at him.) Then another wave of disintegration surged out of the core of the city, which was now very close. Hornwrack staggered. The ambassadors writhed and thrashed, their joints gouting fluid. Fay Glass screamed.

'Leave us alone! We will soon die here!'

Hornwrack could bear no more of it. He was used to a less equivocal violence. Retching, he stumbled over to Fulthor's inert body and got the powered broadsword from its ceramic sheath. He had never used one before. He went back and cut inexpertly at the flailing forelimbs and compound eyes of the ambassadors. This time they made a half-hearted fight of it as they backed into the purple gloom. But their odd, gnarled weapons only sputtered feebly in the damp.air; gave up strings of pale light: and failed utterly. They tumbled on to their sides as he chopped off their legs. They whirred round in circles, pushing the earth up into irregular mounds. Soon they were all dead. He stared at them in astonishment; at the artifact fizzing in his hand; at Fay Glass. At the last moment they had tried to direct his attention away from the hulk of Benedict Paucemanly's airboat, the *Heavy Star.*

The hull of this ship loomed over him, crawling with the enigmatic corrosions of its hundred-year sojourn in the Moon. It was embedded in a tall bulwark of compacted sand which curved away right and left like the shell of some huge stadium. Hornwrack walked round it, awed, exultant. That famous machine! Lights were dimly visible through its fissured outer skin; pulpy vines enwrapped it; a few flakes of black and silver paint adhered to its stern – the colours of the House of Methven, set there at the height of the air-siege of Mingulay.

“'Fear death from the air!”'shouted Hornwrack. He laughed. He took hold of the madwoman's wrist in his enthusiasm and pulled her along after him. “'Fear death from the air!”'He thought of Fat Main Etteilla, and the Bistro Californium with its clientele of perverts and poseurs. He thought of the dwarf who had beaten him up in the palace and then abandoned him in the shadow of the Agdon Roches. He thought of the High City, which had wooed him merely to betray him. He thought of the Low City, of the boy in the Rue Sepile, the drifts of sodden chestnut leaves in the late-afternoon light of November, the women laughing in the upstairs rooms. He though of the candle at night, a cat sneaking into the room, the smell of geraniums – one dawn following another until they made eighty years of wounds and fevers. None of it meant anything. It was as if he had been relieved of these things, only to have them changed somehow and given back to

him merely as memories. 'If I can rip her loose we'll fight our way out of this madhouse!'he said. He would fly down to the Pastel City in the last airboat left in the kingdom. There he would speak with the dwarf, perhaps even the Queen. There he'd state his terms. 'She'll never take to space again,'he said, rubbing his thumb over the thin, whitish, lichen-like growths, the network of tiny cracks that dulled the crystal skin. Even this slight contact made him shiver with excitement. He kicked at a door in the stern to see if it would open, and was rewarded by a hollow boom. 'But her motors still work. Look!'

He dropped the High City sword suddenly, grasped the girl by her upper arms. She stared blankly at him. 'Once I flew such vessels!'he cried: 'Don't you believe me?'And then: 'That ghost has given me back the sky. It has given me back the sky!'

Alstath Fulthor came up behind him on all fours and picked up the discarded baan. Some nightmare of the past had him by the head. He sniggered.

'I'll suffer nothing at the hands of those beautiful philosophers,'he said. 'I'll promenade no more in *their* metallic gardens!'

He jumped to his feet, whirling the blade in sputtering arcs round his head. Sparks showered from it into the dead wet air. Discovering no other enemy he advanced on Hornwrack, who produced defensively his steel knife, shouting. 'Fulthor, no more grudges! Stop!'

Fulthor could not stop. Hornwrack allowed him to get in close; ducked the *baan* as it swung in towards his collar bone; and slashed out at Fulthor's hand, taking off two fingers and severing all the major tendons. Fulthor dropped the power blade. He studied his hand in wonder.

'That hand will never annoy me again,'he said.

Before they could stop him he had run off into the gloom, singing.

Hornwrack said, 'I did not mean to do that. This knife had betrayed me.'He threw it down and stepped on it; but the blade would not break despite its flaw, and after a moment he forgot it. He retrieved the *baan* and set about chopping his way into the *Heavy Star* through the stern door. His blows set up a resonant groaning in the crystal hull. He pulled the madwoman in after him. She stared back over her shoulder.

The boat was abandoned and empty. Its motors sent up slow violet motes through a rift in the deck: small worms of light that clung to the metal surfaces, fastened on Hornwrack's mail shirt, and clustered round the steel fillet which bound back his hair. Further in, navigation instruments ticked and sang; he could hear them. It was thick with dust in there. He moved about quietly, touching the things

with which he was familiar. He shivered a little. In the command-bridge was a light like sunshine filtered through bottle-green glass. 'Go and sit down,'he told Fay Glass. (An insect had entered through the damaged hatch; he could hear it moving about in the hold.) The bow of the boat projected right through the wall of the 'stadium'he had seen outside, but nothing was visible through the port-holes, which seemed to be covered by some gelatinous medium like agar. Aft, the insect scratched its way across the hold; paused. Its wings whirred faintly. It departed. Hornwrack let out his breath.

He swallowed.

'Sit still,'he told the woman.

He tried to remember what to do.

Under his clumsy hands the vessel groaned and shook. (It was old. In the Moon something vital had gone out of it, some millennial reservoir had been emptied.) Down below, its motors pulsed, leaking light and generating a rapid percussive shudder. This continued for some minutes, and, transmitted to the outer hull, split it open with a high ringing sound. Splinters of dark glass flew about the bridge; a fissure twenty inches wide appeared in the wall beside Hornwrack's shoulder, admitting foetid gases; Fay Glass was picked up and flung against a bulkhead, and thereafter lay on the deck like a discarded towel, her thin bruised legs drawn up under her chin. The boat lifted an inch or two and was stationary again. Gelatinous fluids streamed off the forward portholes and slopped into the bridge where, mixed with the sand from the wall outside, they formed a foul and slimy secretion. Hornwrack clung to his seat.

'You bitch,'he said. 'You old bitch.'

Outside, sand could be seen fountaining up against a purple sky. With a despairing groan *Heavy Star* pulled free of the retaining wall and hurled itself into the mad airs above. Hornwrack sobbed with relief. Around him, instruments were demanding his attention in hysterical whispers, but he had forgotten what most of them were for. The smell of the stuff in the cabin was making him feel sick. He leaned forward to look out of the portholes. The boat was wallowing above an elliptical walled pit about a hundred yards long. This was filled with a grey, viscous, partly-organic substance which was now leaking from the breached wall like the white of an egg. As the level of this putrid stuff fell it revealed by stages a colossal human figure stretched out in the pit.

Benedict Paucemanly!

A monstrous and corrupt flowering of his flesh had taken place in all those white years on the Moon. Constrained by a thick rubber suit in case he burst, studded with new sensory organs, whorls and ropes of flesh which reported only mutation and pain, he lay there prostrate.

He had tried to become something else and failed. His arms were by his sides and his vast corpulent legs apart. It was from here that he had broadcast his despairing spectre, to Viriconium and beyond. 'I want only death.'Teetering between two realities, he could perceive neither of them except as an agonizing dream – and yet here he was half a god, a demiurge or source, out from which spread like the ripples on a stagnant pond all the new nightmares of Earth: he had become, unwillingly enough, the amplifier of the swarm's *Umwelt,* as he had once been an ear that listened to the stars. He had lain like this for ten years, groaning and whimpering and vomiting into the mask which had long ago been forced over his bloated head so that he could see something of the world surrounding him. Worse: through his great corroded bulk burrowed the parasitic larvae of the swarm, deposited there when gravity first sucked them down and mortalized them. A thousand miles away, in the false windows of the throne-room at Viriconium, his other image was telling Cellur: 'The breeding cells are full. Whatever emerges will wrest the Earth to its own purposes.

He was the breeding cell. It was a strange end for a legendary man.

A gust of wind caught the airboat, causing it to spin slowly through a few degrees of arc. A smell came up. Hornwrack shuddered. The enormous half-corpse swung beneath him, displaying its fermented sores, the cratered flesh that bulged between the straps. The larvae forced themselves in and out. How long had it sought him, before it came upon him in Methven's Hall? What psychic bond now linked them? As he stared down, the spectre formed again behind him, attempting to attract his attention by snapping its fingers and coughing softly. He knew it was there. He didn't dare look back.

'Bugger me, lad,'it said, 'but we've seen some queer berths, you and I.'

He turned against his will to face it. It was bobbing about under the ceiling, making embarrassed washing motions with its fat hands.

'Now you've seen me as I am lad, would you do me a favour?'

'Go away. Why have you brought me here?'

'Pork!'it choked. *'Porcit me te bonan…* Death!… There's only the jungle out there, son. The water barrel's contaminated and the captain's got the clap…'

'What are you saying? Leave me alone!'

… hung up there raw-blind in the ratlines like the corpse of a dog.'The spectre quivered suddenly; sniffed, as if scenting something new in the air. 'The lee shore!'it screamed. 'The lee shore!'Then, quieter: 'And only we two left abroad, matey.'

It put its head intelligently to one side.

'Christ, listen to those parrots!'it said in a hoarse whisper.

(While down in the pit, trapped among these metaphors and invented languages, Paucemanly strove to overcome his madness and communicate. His colossal limbs, partly submerged in milky grey slime, kicked and waved. Behind the eyepieces of his mask – which, like the panes of an aquarium abandoned in some dusty room, were occluded by a green deposit – his weak blue eyes rolled and bulged. The wind stank of delirium, gangrene and false compass bearings. A tear of self-pity trickled down his cheek. He was adrift between universes.)

'Kill me,'the spectre implored at last. 'Kill me, lad. You can do it.'

Hornwrack advanced on it with flailing arms. It shied away from him, belching morosely.

'Is that why you led me here?'he asked it.

It faded abruptly and he never saw it again. He bit his lip and went back to the controls.

'I'm commandeering this boat,'he said.

He sent the *Heavy Star* lumbering away from that City and out into the calm emptiness beyond. He could not bear the ancient airman's degradation. He could not bear his own despair (which he conceived of as compassion). Behind him in the pit a great hand came up, fumbled, ripped away the tormenting mask: and with a terrible lowing sound that echoed across the shallow poisoned tarns and endless peathags of the continental waste, Benedict Paucemanly plunged into the full nightmare of his own decay.

A single erratic line of footprints crossed the waste. Along it at intervals were strewn items of plate armour which lay like shards of scarlet porcelain amid the blowing dust, glowing faintly as if by their own light. It was night, now; or the end of the World. The sky, drained of its aching purples except where the enigmatic city festered on the horizon, was of a green so dark as to be almost black; it had the shine of a newly-cracked flint. Beneath this pall, files of insects entered the city from all directions, accompanied by occasional enormous mirages and flashes of rose-coloured light. The silence of the caesura was over everything; judgement in abeyance. Hornwrack, remote and unimpassioned, allowed the vessel to drift along at walking pace above the footprints while the madwoman, recovered from her latest malaise, pressed her face to the portholes and sang in a small bruised voice,

On the shores of the diamond lake
We shall watch the fishes
Faldiladia

All decisions were postponed. After half an hour of this they came upon the Reborn Man.

He was running north among the deep peat-groughs which here

wind their way back to a flat and boggy watershed dotted with foundering cairns and rotten wooden posts. His limbs were shadowy, but on the loose black stuff he had worn beneath his armour there flared like a beacon the ideograph of his House. For some minutes he seemed unaware of the arrival of the *Heavy Star,* and ran on ignoring it, his arms windmilling for balance as he picked his way among the steep-sided channels and fibrous mounds. Then he looked up, staggered, and shook his fist. His mouth opened and shut angrily. He swayed, cupping his ears with his hands: and fell into the bed of a narrow stream, where he lay with his head in the peaty water for a moment or two, looking confused. By the time Hornwrack, having landed the machine a little way off, had found him again, he was back on his feet.

'Where have I been?'he asked.

'I don't know,'said Hornwrack. 'Look, I am sorry to have cut off your fingers. I no longer bear you any grudge.'(He examined this statement with surprise. It was true.)

Fulthor looked down at his maimed hand.

'My mind feels very clear,'he said. 'Where is the Dwarf?'He had forgotten everything, and could not take in Hornwrack's explanations. Causality meant nothing to him. 'Have we been to Iron Chine already, then?'he would ask: 'Or have we yet to see those burning sails?'Or, holding his head tenderly as if he could feel Time coiled and knotted there in it like purple braid, 'We've to meet Arnac san Tehn. Tonight, in the garden of Empty Wounds!'Smiling secretively, the madwoman took his hand and affected to count the fingers. He bore this calmly. The two of them stood there against black waste and obsidian sky; and in Hornwrack's imagination a light surrounded them. It was as though they had already separated themselves from the world in preparation for their descent into the past. He was filled with a deep resentment of their beauty (in response to which images of the Rue Sepile passed through his brain like fatal playing cards, or the lines extemporised by some bad poet in the purgatorial night – 'Here is the smell of fog; I see dead geraniums on your window sill: and women whisper in the lighted rooms'); but this was suppressed immediately by a corresponding urge to protect them, both from the world and his own envy.

'You will have to look after each other now,'he told Fulthor. He stared at the City fulminating like a spot of phosphorus on the horizon. 'I don't know how you'll get back to Viriconium, even if you want to go there.'

He tried to think of something else to say.

'Good luck.'

They watched puzzledly as he trudged back to the *Heavy Star,*

which was sinking a little under its own weight in the mud. For a moment it looked as if the madwoman might run after him. An expression of ordinary human intelligence crossed her face. Then she laughed. The old machine rose gracelessly into the air and turned towards the City.

The City! Its, end is near. It expands and contracts, like a lung. Regular spasms of dissolution shake it like the vomits and distempers of a dying king. It is full of fires, not all of them real; memories of a history never achieved, a future unrealised. Sketchy and counterfeit, the towers of its sister city Viriconium advance and recede through a roseate smoke. Up from the buildings come fountains of earth! They pour into the sky as if gravity had been reversed, and where they fall on the surrounding plain a litter of insects is deposited, bits of dead insects which lie like ruined machinery amid the crude stones. At the height of each spasm the ground tolls like a bell; deep in the streets inexplicable phantoms stalk (headless women, their jewelled sandals sinking into a carpet of dusty grasshopper husks, rains of stinking skulls and luminous beetles, a sail moving down some non-existent Pleasure Canal: failed dreams of a compromise with the bony skeleton of Earth); and a great mad hooting goes up from the heart of the City, a groan of pain and horror in which may be distinguished the voice of the mutated airboatman calling to the assassin he has lured across a thousand miles to serve him -*Kill me.*

The insects ignored this lowing call – as of some large but delicately-organized animal being disembowelled – and forced themselves in and out like wasps round a rotting apple. They buzzed erratically across the plain; hurled themselves into the pits they had dug; and gathered in the dark air in diffuse humming clouds. Meanwhile, the *Heavy Star,* stern down, fabric wounded by the curious stresses of space, floundered toward them with blue lights leaking from its engine rooms. They were aware of it. It fascinated them. They made sudden abortive darts and forays in its direction. Did they link it with their flight down from the Moon? Did they perceive Galen Hornwrack encysted at the heart of its simple nervous system? Some of the more daring individuals threw themselves against its hull, only to topple away into the convection currents and streams of floating debris; which consumed them. This agitation grew as Hornwrack approached the erupting City. Their forays became more purposeful, and more prolonged. The City pulsed and heaved, generating a savage mauve glare, and they came up from it like smoke.

Up on the watershed Fulthor and the madwoman, interrupted in some partial rite of the Afternoon, some fragment of an old sin, shaded their eyes against the novel light. (Their iconic calm now representing a wiser – or at least more ordered – station of the world,

a culture which would surely have taken such fireworks in its stride…) The plain was alive with crippled insects, tiny as aphids and bathed in the magnetic radiations of the City. A cold wind sprang up, lashed the boggy waste, and – rolling their wingless corpses before it like the discarded regalia of a mystery play – rushed away into the north; while above, the *Heavy Star,* a wobbling black mote in the hectic air, rose to meet the spreading swarm, and was engulfed.

They fastened themselves on to its outer hull like locusts on a branch. It strained forward as if the air had solidified around it; and was brought to a standstill above the perimeter of the City, where the hulk of Benedict Paucemanly greeted it with booms and roars of self-pity, waving his infested limbs. (From up on the watershed this activity seemed like the movements of some tiny damaged mechanical toy.) He had replaced his mask but was unable to secure it, so that it hung awry on his blubbering tublike head like the woollen cap on the head of a retarded child. His new organs pulsed, engorging themselves in time to the rhythms of the City. 'In the Moon,'he said, 'it was like white gardens.'He begged for freedom in an abandoned language. He blinked up, watching the insects as they continued to alight on his old ship. When they could find no further space to settle they attached themselves to one another in a parody of copulation. Beneath this rustling layer the *Heavy Star* struggled to gain height. Suddenly, violet bodides arced from its bows! Caught up in the discharge of the ancient cannon many of the insects dropped away crackling and roasting and setting fire to their neighbours, so that they fell about the ears of the decaying airboatman like burning leaves.

Fear death ftom the air! Up there, we can see, Hornwrack fears nothing. He makes the boat his own. Powerplants enfeebled by its unimaginable journeys, substructure creaking like an old door, it nevertheless wriggles ecstati-cally under his hands, light flaring off its stern. We see it even now, long after the fact, rolling and spinning against the southern quadrant of the sky. The patterns it is making are gay, adventive, dangerous. It tumbles off the top of a loop and falls like a. stone. It soars eighteen hundred feet vertically upwards, spraying violet fire almost at random into the dark green varnished sky. Persistence of vision makes of it a paintbrush, violet strokes on an obsidian ground, while the insects fall like comets all around it, trailing a foul black smoke, to shatter and burst pulpily on the plain beneath! Even the watchers on the watershed have abandoned their cruel calm. He may yet escape! something whispers inside them. He might yet escape!… But now the energy cannon has stopped working, and he seems to have undergone a fatal faltering or change of heart. They bite their lips and urge him on. Some listlessness, though, prevents him: something inhaled from the cabbagey air of the Low

City long ago. Now the *Heavy Star* drifts immediately above Paucemanly's carcass like an exhausted pilot fish. The insects descend. All Hornwrack's efforts have made no impression on their numbers. One by one they approach the wallowing vehicle. One by one they settle on its creaking, riven old hull and commence to bear it down…

Fay Glass, shading her eyes, looked out across the plain.

The City was a throbbing sepulchre of light. At the height of every spasm light vomited from it into the world, bringing a chaotic new reality and causing vast attenuated shadows to flicker across the stony plain; while above it hovered the swarm like an antithetical twin, a giant shadowy planet composed of interlocking wings, curled abdomens and entangled insectile legs, from which glittered thousands of mosaic eyes. Deep inside it was buried the *Heavy Star,* the whine and groan of its engines overlaid by an unearthly stridulation – a dry, triumphant song like the song of the wasteland locust as it rushes over the bony spaces of the south. Lulled by its own barren psalm, the swarm basked in the light of its coming transformation, anticipating the day when its larvae, made over entirely, should leave the refuge of the mutated airman and come forth into a reality neither human nor insect; and themselves bask in the warmth of a totally unknown sun.

'Such a long way,'she said dreamily (and apropos, perhaps, of something else: for what could she know?) 'Such a long way, and so many wings.'.

But now the *Heavy Star* tapped some final resource. The swarm, caught unawares, shook itself out into the density of a cloud of winter smoke. From this burst Galen Hornwrack and his legendary craft – which, devouring its own substance, was spilling a lemon-yellow light from every rift and porthole!

There was a thoughtful pause, as if he were surveying his chances.

Then, before the swarm could act again, he switched off the motors, and the boat began to fall straight down toward the city; slowly at first, then faster and faster.

What ofViriconium – Pastel City and erstwhile centre of the world – at this desperate conjunction, amid the mass abdication of real things and the triumph of metaphysics? Twin sister of the City on the distant plain, she nevertheless approaches her dissolution with a kind of fatalistic calm (stemming perhaps from a sense of history – 'an irony in the very stones'- and the feeling that it may all have happened before. Who has lived here for long, Ansel Verdigris asks us, in the fragmentary polemic *Answers,* without experiencing some such sensation?). Her cold plazas and antique alleys reeking of cabbage accept their fate. Her geometries accept their fate. Her people accept

their fate: they are so superstitious that they believe almost everything; and so vulgar they have noticed hardly anything.

In the Artists'Quarter, in the Bistro Californium, they stare at one another and the door; sitting in the blue and gamboge shadows like wax figures waiting for a murder, for their own long-sensed termination which at once fascinates and frightens them. 'I *dined* with the hertis-Padnas."Oh, shut up.'Unearthly structures have insinuated themselves between the towers on the hill at Minnet-Saba: hanging galleries under the fat white Moon, like veins of quartz; sandy domes and papery things like wasps'nests. All have an immaterial feel, the air of an intrusion from some other imagination: but the Low City streets are generally so cold that there is nobody in them to notice. And the Reborn have gone. (All night long on the high paths of the Monar their columns move uneasily north. Many will die of cold. Out among the tottering seracs of the glaciers, their advance parties report mirages.) So there is no-one abroad in the High City to see the palace of Methvet Nian pulsing like a great alchemical rose up there at the summit of the Proton Way, its filigree outer shell warping with light. No stars are visible above that hall, only there is a feeling of some heavy weight, some great uncommon cloud balanced above it. Its corridors are deserted but for the crawling survivors of the Sign trying to become insects -The palace awaited its end, breathing like an old woman:

and with every shallow inspiration a yellow cabbagey air was drawn in from the city outside, to trickle down the passageways, chill the devotees of the Sign where they crouched in corners over their dragging abdominal sacs or quivering elytra, and come eventually through a region of old machines in niches, to the throne-room of the Queen -that room which Tomb the Dwarf had barricaded with corpses, and in which he now lay unable to get up.

In the end it hadn't been much ofa fight; better than some he'd had, worse than many. The usual shouts and stinks; some hot work with the axe in a corner; the room frozen at sudden odd angles as the mechanical wife bore him to conclusions in the bluish gloom: shadows teetering on the walls. When it came down to it the servants of the Sign had behaved more like its victims – curiously lethargic and selfinvolved, as if trying to recover their human state. Those lucky enough to be unimpeded by their deformities had been preoccupied with them nevertheless, and had found it difficult to defend themselves against the axe; the rest had welcomed it quite openly. That axe! He remembered it now. How it hissed and sputtered in the dark, dripping with St Elmo's Fire! He recalled its evil light in the dim depopulated Soubridge streets at the conclusion of the War of the Two Queens. It had been with him on the Proton Circuit, when he stood on

a heap of corpses to shake the hand of Alstath Fulthor; it had been with him at Waterbeck's rout, when with tegeus-Cromis the legendary swordsman he had watched a thousand farm-boys slaughtered in ten minutes:

and both these friends now lost to him through death or madness. He remembered distinctly how he had first dug it up; but he could not think where… At any rate it had been a terrible thing to unleash on a handful of deformed shopkeepers, who could meet it only with kitchen knives and nightmares, in a shadowy room at the 'smoky candle end of time'. He could not understand how they had brought him down.

There was a strong smell of death in the room, and his view of it was obscured by the dead themselves. They surrounded him like an earthwork topped with a fringe of stiffened limbs which framed part of a tapestry here, there a broken high-backed chair; and the blue light lay on their waxy skin like a bruise. The mechanical wife embraced him. Her delicate spars had snapped like icicles when she fell; her spine was cracked: and up from her mysterious centres of power came a thin stream of whitish motes, interrupted every so often by a sluice of yellow radiation and a momentary lifelike twitching of her limbs. Cellur and the Queen had tried and failed to free him, passing to and fro in front of him, their distracted expressions like those of illuminated figures on a grubby pasteboard playing card.

Now they were waiting calmly for the end, staring into the invisible north as if they might by force of will understand what was happening there; as if they sensed Galen Hornwrack perched there on the edge of his long fall. Their voices were desultory in the gloom.

'Birds no longer come to see me out of the high air,'whispered one; while the other smiled regretfully and said:

'A dead bird swung at his belt during all that journey down the Rannoch. I did not hate my cousin, but it was a hard winter.

Tomb licked his lips. He was dying. The excitement of murder, which had come back to him like a familiar old pain, was now ebbing. He was stranded on the shore of himself, hollowed out yet filled with enigmas which he recognised dimly as the evidence of his own unwounded psyche. He had made few judgements, before or after the fact: thus the events of his life, and the figures in it, retained their wholeness, remaining – he was surprised to find – like icons in the brain, sharp and brightly lit. Now they presented themselves to him as a series of unexpected gifts – a spring shower making paste out of the pink dust of the Mogadon Littoral, where the enamelled hermit crabs run up sideways out of the sea; the smell of whitebait frying in some cafe on the Rue Montdampierre; someone saying 'Here the anemone-boy spilt wine on her cloak'- shy, unbidden, peripheral little

memories. He was captivated. While he waited, he reviewed them. He attended them with a shyness of his own, a pure and unironic affection for his own past.

(Tomb the Dwarf! Much later, Methvet Nian discovered his caravan undamaged in Old Palace Yard. Its vulgar colours were st~ill bright beneath the winter's grime. The inside of it was very clean. She could find in none of its cleverly-designed cupboards and hiding places anything personal to him, anything he might have kept out of sentiment. His old spade was there, but it was simply a spade. His belongings were utilitarian, or else had myths -and thus existences – of their own: the little furnace, for instance, which had reforged the Nameless Sword all those years ago. There was nothing here to remember him by -this was how she put it to herself. Nevertheless, rather than leave she turned over the cold bed-linen, or touched a small pewter cup. Out in the courtyard there was clinging rain; yellow light and footsteps on the cobbles; night drawing in. Sitting alone in the dark she wondered what had become of his ponies.)

City, dwarf, Queen: all waited.

Cellur the old man, alien millenia fading in his brain, waited.

Up in the north, Fay Glass and Alstath Fulthor waited on the quaking plain. Demented, pained, tortured by the persistence of the universe, Benedict Paucemanly could only wait.

Hornwrack himself waited, falling eternally toward the mysterious city.

He had pulled his hair ruthlessly back and fastened it with a steel clasp in imitation of the doomed captains of a now-forgotten war. About him he had drawn the meal-coloured cloak of the Low City bravo (which with its grotesquely-dyed hem signifies that he has wallowed in-the blood of fifty men). His hands, he discovered, had betrayed him over the breaking of the knife. They had hidden it in his cloak. Now it lay in his lap, flawed blade black and enigmatic. In all, he was as the Queen has seen him last, in her drawing room at Viriconium. He had rejected the myth she had offered him and adhered to his own. These symbols of the pose which had sustained him through eighty years of wet dawns in the Rue Sepile now served, perhaps, to reassure him of that.

The ship fell. He would not touch the controls. He held the knife tightly to keep his hands occupied. One moment his thin face was in eclipse. The nextit had been thrown into prominence by a flash of rose-red light from the decaying node beneath.

We are not talking of his motives. All his life he had looked not for life itself but for some revelation to unify it and give it meaning: some – any – significant occurrence. Whether he was able or willing to

recognise it now it had come, we cannot say. It is immaterial anyway. In the event he sacrificed himself to release the old airboatman from an undeserved nightmare. It was a rescue.

At the instant of impact the boat split open around him like an empty gourd, but he did not feel it.

Instead, as the crystal splinters entered his brain, he experienced two curious dreams of the Low City, coming so quickly one after the other that they seemed simultaneous. In the first, long shadows moved across the ceiling-frescoes of the Bistro Californium, beneath which Lord Mooncarrot's clique awaited his return to make a fourth at dice. Footsteps sounded on the threshold. The women hooded their eyes and smiled; or else stifled a yawn, raising dove-grey gloves to their blue, phthisic lips. Viriconium, with all her narcissistic intimacies and equivocal invitations, welcomed him again. He had hated that city, yet now it was his past and it was all he had to regret… The second of these visions was of the Rue Sepile. It was dawn, in summer. Horse-chestnut flowers bobbed like white wax candles above the deserted pavements. An oblique light struck into the street – so that its long and normally profitless perspectives seemed to lead straight into the heart of a younger, more ingenuous City – and fell across the fronts of the houses where he had once lived, warming the rotten brick and imparting to it a not unpleasant pinkish colour.

Up at the second floor casement window a boy was busy with the bright red geraniums arranged along the outer sill in lumpen terracotta pots. He looked down at Hornwrack and smiled. Before Hornwrack could speak he drew down the lower casement and turned away. The glass which now separated them reflected the morning sunlight in a silent explosion; and Hornwrack, dazzled, mistaking the light for the smile, suddenly imagined an incandescence which would melt all those old streets!

Rue Sepile; the Avenue of Children; Margery Fry Court: all melted down! All the shabby dependencies of the Plaza of Unrealized Time! All slumped, sank into themselves, eroded away until nothing was left in his field of vision but an unbearable white sky above and the bright clustered points of the chestnut leaves below – and then only a depthless opacity, behind which he could detect the beat of his own blood, the vitreous humour of the eye. He imagined the old encrusted brick flowing, the glass cracking and melting from its frames even as they shrivelled away, the shreds of paint flaring green and gold, the geraniums toppling in flames to drop like comets through the fiery air; he imagined the chestnuts fading to nothing, not even white ash, under this weight of light! All had winked away like reflections in ajar of water glass, and only the medium remained, bright, viscid, vacant.

He had a sense of the intolerable briefness of matter, its desperate signalling and touching, its fall; and simultaneously one of its unendurable durability.

He thought, *Something lies behind all the realities of the universe and is replacing them here, something less solid and more permanent.* Then the world stopped haunting him forever.

It is so hard to convey simultaneity:

As Hornwrack dreamed, so did Tomb the Iron Dwarf, dying a thousand miles away in his one hundred and fiftieth year, old friend of kings and princes; as Cellur and the Queen stood in the chilly throne-room, staring into the north and whispering in the dry voices of the old, so Fay Glass and Alstath Fulthor stood in the distant waste and watched Benedict Paucemanly open his arms as if to embrace the falling airboat. His voice hooted morosely across to them on the wind. 'You've come home,'he tried to say: to whom or what is unclear, unless it was himself. It was too late anyway. The *Heavy Star* buried itself in the bloated arch of his chest and broke apart with a muffled thud. He rolled like a stricken whale with this enormous blow, making a soft almost female noise of grief or pleasure; and a white light issued suddenly from him, a nimbus which filled the pit and spread so rapidly that within a minute the whole of the city had been transfigured, its alien arcades and papery constructions appearing to glow from within.

This light rippled out over the Earth, thinning as it went. By the time it had crossed the bitter coasts of Fenlen it was nothing more than a faint disturbance of matter which, speeding through the very stones of the world, liberated everything in its path from the 'new reality'. It cleansed the ruins of Iron Chine, where for a month great green beetles had fumbled through the whitish remains of Elmo Buffin's ill-starred fleet. Spilling over the battlements of the cold city of Duirinish it relieved the proctors there of their visions -craneflies stalking distant fantastic littorals, trees into men, men into geometrical figures. It swept between the shattered buttresses of the Agdon scarp, and when it had passed the stunted oakwoods on the slopes below were untenanted again. It flickered among the high passes of the Monar, scouring them with a glacial light; and finally crossed the walls of the Pastel City to empty those ancient streets of all illusions but their proper human ones.

(Out there on the alien plain, Fay Glass and Alstath Fulthor felt it pulse through them, and were pulled away into the past. 'Arnac san Tehn!'he called triumphantly: 'We meet in the Garden of Women! Midnight!'But she whispered, 'So many wings,'a little sad, perhaps, to leave. 'So many wings,'seeing the cruelty of it all. They lingered for a while as grey phantoms amid the sinking cairns of the watershed, the

Afternoon Cultures reclaiming them by degrees. Now they are lost to us for good.)

Benedict Paucemanly writhed silently as if determined to vomit something up. All was done but this one thing: his death. He groaned and strained. Abruptly the larvae of the swarm burst out of his distended pores, fell off him into the pit and dried up like dead leeches. He hooted in triumph. The light fountained up from him for some minutes more, all the light he had absorbed during his long imprisonment in the Moon, all his pain. He was beatified, dissolving in his own light. Repository and symbol, he released all the energies of the two realities colliding within him: and in releasing them released the Earth.

The plain darkens. We see it from a long way off. The old airboatman is dead. There is a slow fading of the sky, a cold wind springing up; a deeper night arrives. The mysterious City winks like an ember on the edge of the plain, fading from white to purple to a dim red and then nothing. For a moment the swarm hangs above this its first and last stronghold, forming itself into a complex gridlike pattern in the obsidian air – some last attempt to communicate with the human world, a glowing symbol, meaningless yet full of import against the darkness. Down floats its stridulant hymn, bony celebration of the waste spaces of the universe. Then, its ontological momentum lost, its position in the material continuum untenable, the life goes out of it. Those individuals which survive will become mere insects and wander about the plain forever with folded wings, as lost as all the other races that ever came down to the Earth, and whose descendants now inhabit the Deep Wastes. When they meet they will stare lengthily at one another as if trying to remember something; or, copulating hopelessly beneath a black rain, become suddenly immobile, so that they resemble tangled silver brooches mislaid on the desert by the hetaerae of some vanished civilisation…

EPILOGUE

Viriconium.

Its achingly formal gardens and curious geometries, its streets that reek of squashed fruit and fish; its (lowers like purple wounds on the lawns of the 'Hermitage'at TroisVertes; its palace like a shell: how can one deal with it in words?

Viriconium.

If you go and stand up in the foothills of Monar you can see it hanging below you wrapped in a mantle of millenial calm. From the brow of Hollin Low Moor you may watch it fade into another night. Its histories make of the very air about it an amber, an entrapment. Light flares from the vivid tiered heights of Minnet-Saba, from the riverine curve of the Proton Circuit, the improbable towers and plazas of the Atteline Quarter; under a setting sun banks of anemones and sol d'or planted about the graves of tegeus-Cromis and Tomb the Dwarf glow like triumphal stained glass; and someone far off in the still twilight is reading aloud a verse of Ansel Verdigris, the poet of the City.

Viriconium.

Spring. Down in the Cispontine Quarter the vegetation has begun to flourish again. The fuel-gathering women are no longer seen. Ragwort clothes all the fallen walls and earthy scars, its stems already infested with black and yellow caterpillars (later in the year these become an attractive crimson moth which was once the symbol of the City). Up at Alves, jackdaws are squabbling all day over nesting sites in the cracked dome of the observatory. And in that demimonde which has its centre at the Plaza of Unrealized Time, the women smile down from their casement windows, lifting a hand to pat newly-washed hair. Humanity has recolon ized the inconceivable avenues of the High City – gaping up open-mouthed at the inexplicable architecture of the Afternoon Cultures while it empties its bladder in their millennial gutters – and hung out its washing again in the Low. The 'Winter of the Locust'is over. Only a sudden increase in the number of beggars (some of whom have the most novel deformities) along the Rivelin Way persuades us that it ever took place, that we ever listened to that white thin song.

We hear that Lord Mooncarrot is seen about with Chorica nam Vell Ban, that cold fish. He has received her mother at his house in Minnet-Saba: rumour is rife. We hear that the feverish Madame 'L'has ceased her visits to the Boulevard Aussman, is cured of all but her bad taste, and this week reopens her salon. We hear that Paulinus Rack, the fat poetaster and undertaker's agent has come by a packet of

manuscript in not-unquestionable circumstances, and plans soon to edit a volume of the cockatoo's work. He can be seen any day, with his fat hands and jade cane, drinking lemon gin at the Bistro Californium. (He has theory of the Locust Winter and its madness. Who does not? Invite him to dinner and he will spill it on his waistcoat with the custard.) As for the rest of the Low City: the younger poets favour a Bistro gnosticism – the World, they say, has already ended, and we are living out hours for which no chronology allows. They cut atrocious figures as they swagger about the Artists'Quarter practising their polemic. And these days so many poseurs are wearing the meal-coloured cloak that the bravos have taken in defence to yellow velvet.

In short, the Eternal City stands as it once did, infuriating, beautiful, vulgar by turns. Only the Reborn are missing. You do not see them now in the Atteline Quarter, or on the Proton Circuit hurrying from the palace on an errand of Alstath Fuithor's. (He has never returned. The Low City always knew something like this would happen. It taps the side of its nose: sniffs.) After the persecutions they endured at the hands of the Sign, the majority of them will never come here again. They will live now in the deserts for many generations, their germ-plasm becoming as alien as that of the big lizards of the Great Brown Waste, refining their theory of Time, redefining their heritage, growing mad and strange.

In the evenings Queen Jane, Methvet Nian of Viriconium, sits in the side chamber or *salle* she uses as a library and drawing room, sometimes meditating this loss, which is one of many in her life. 'A world trying to remember itself:'surrounded by her sheets of music and delicate little corals, she has the wry but supple calm ofan ageing danseuse; keeps in a rosewood chest with copper reinforcing bands a gourd-shaped musical instrument from the deep East; hears the past in every passing footstep, and wonders often what became of the sword and the mail and the assassin she gave them to.

'I had hoped for so much from the Reborn,'she confides to her new advisor, the old man who is so very rarely seen in public. 'We might have rebuilt our culture. Yet they were perhaps too concerned with their own salvation to teach us… And we always too uncomplicated for their delicate nerves…'

She closes her eyes.

'They enriched us even so. Can you still see them, Cellur, when Tomb woke them first? What a pageant they made, there in the brain chamber at Knarr, with all their strange weapons!'

He can see nothing. He was not there. But he has forgotten even that (or perhaps he realizes that she has) and with a small diffident movement of his hands says, 'I am sure I do, my lady;'then, remembering something else, smiles suddenly. 'Did I not live then in a

tower by the sea?'

Ten thousand grey wings beat down the salty wind, like a storm in his head!

notes

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